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where the laws of man no longer have any bearing."*

MASS MOVEMENT

BLACK WINGS OF CTHULHU 5

TWENTY NEW TALES OF
LOVECRAFTIAN HORROR



EDITED BY S. T. JOSHI

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BLACK WINGS OF CTHULHU 5

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LOVECRAFTIAN HORROR

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BLACK WINGS OF CTHULHU 5

Introduction



. P. LOVECRAFT HAS LEFT SUCH AN IMMENSE PAPER trail—stories, essays, poems, and thousands of letters—that it seems as if every aspect of his life, work, and thought is visible for all to see. But even in the most exhaustively chronicled life there remain elements of mystery—gaps and lacunae that later writers can flesh out with their own imaginations. And the themes, conceptions, and motifs that underlie his fiction are similarly capable of almost infinite expansion and elaboration. And so we come to this fifth instalment of the *Black Wings* series.

We are today faced with an unprecedented flood of “Lovecraftian” or “Cthulhu Mythos” writings from publishers large and small, by authors well-known or obscure. What was once a trickle has become a tidal wave, and some have wondered whether we are witnessing some kind of “bubble” that might burst someday. We are indeed reminded of the general “boom” in weird fiction in the 1970s and 1980s, which produced so much rubbish—by authors who had nothing to say in the weird mode but who were merely seeking to duplicate the popularity of the relatively few authors who achieved bestseller status—that it collapsed of its own mediocrity. There is, as in any field, plenty of mediocrity in contemporary Lovecraftian writing; but a solid core of sound, even brilliant, work remains.

One of the central themes in Lovecraft’s writing is the problematical role of science in human affairs. It would be a grotesque mistake to think that Lovecraft—an atheist and materialist who regarded science as the ultimate arbiter of truth and a strong bulwark against the intellectual errors of religion, quackery, and mysticism—had any doubts about the value of scientific enquiry. But, as one well aware of the fragility of the human

psyche, he often pondered on the catastrophic effects that the realisation of our own risible insignificance in the cosmic scheme of things might have on the sensitive mind. As he wrote in an early letter: “To the scientist there is the joy in pursuing truth which nearly counteracts the depressing revelations of truth.” Many of his greatest tales, such as “The Colour out of Space,” *At the Mountains of Madness*, and “The Shadow out of Time,” depict scientists coming face to face with the appalling implications of their discoveries. In this volume, we see this thread underscoring such otherwise varied tales as Caitlín R. Kiernan’s “Far from Any Shore,” Lynne Jamneck’s “In Bloom,” and Donald R. Burleson’s “Seed of the Gods.”

History was immensely important to Lovecraft. “The past is *real*,” he once wrote in a letter. “It is *all there is*.” His quest to absorb the historical treasures of his native land—from Quebec to Key West, with stops along the way at New York, Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., Richmond, Charleston, St Augustine, and many other well-preserved havens of antiquity—was unrelenting, and it reveals a deep-seated need to enmesh himself in the coils of history as a kind of shield against cosmic insignificance. This devotion to history and topography led him to create his own constellation of New England towns (Arkham, Kingsport, Dunwich, Innsmouth)—towns that have themselves taken on a life of their own in the work of subsequent writers, as several stories in this book (Jonathan Thomas’s “Plenty of Irem,” W. H. Pugmire’s “In Blackness Etched, My Name,” Sunni K Brock’s “Fire Breeders”) indicate.

Several other writers have transferred the historical depth and strangeness of Lovecraft’s New England into other corners of the world. Ramsey Campbell most famously did so in the English towns of Severnford, Brichester, and Goatswood. Today, David Hambling has written an entire volume of stories focused on the (real) town of Dulwich, whose name so deliciously recalls one of Lovecraft’s own imaginary locales. Hambling’s “A Question of Blood” not only evokes a sense of history but also echoes Lovecraft’s abiding concern with the effects of heredity upon the individual. John Reppion, another young English writer, is, in “The Black Abbess,” able to draw upon a much older historical backdrop than

Lovecraft was able to do. Sam Gafford's "Casting Fractals" features a character who, after reading Lovecraft's tales, finds dreadful hints of cosmic menace in our own recent and bloodstained history. Darrell Schweitzer's "The Red Witch of Chorazin" finds Lovecraftian terror in a remote corner of rural Pennsylvania, while Stephen Woodworth's ingenious "Voodoo" peels back the surface of tourist-ridden New Orleans to reveal a far darker substratum.

Lovecraft's concern with the psychological effects of "truth" is keenly etched in a number of his tales—and never more potently than when, as happens in "The Shadow over Innsmouth" and "The Shadow out of Time," the first-person narrator himself discovers some appalling fact about himself that he cannot deny. Robert H. Waugh's "The Woman in the Attic" mirrors this existential terror by showing us what might have been going through the mind of poor Nabby Gardner (from "The Colour out of Space") as she succumbs to the ravaging effects of the meteorite that fell on her farm. From a very different perspective, the protagonist of Nicole Cushing's "Diary of a Sane Man" may or may not be "mad" in the conventional sense—or has he just seen the true nature of the universe and our frightful position therein? And Nancy Kilpatrick's "The Oldies" actually takes us into the realm of psychiatry, where a group of traumatised women seek to deal with a reality that overwhelms one of them.

World-building was a core function of Lovecraft's tactile imagination, whether it be the fantasy realms found in his "Dunsanian" tales, from "The White Ship" to *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath*, or his more famous Mythos tales, where the entire universe is refashioned before our eyes. Here, such stories as Cody Goodfellow's "Snakeladder," Mark Howard Jones's "Red Walls," and Donald Tyson's "The Organ of Chaos" effortlessly create new worlds out of whole cloth or reconfigure our own world into something new and terrifying.

As suggested above, the figure of the gaunt, lantern-jawed Lovecraft roaming the streets of his beloved Providence, Rhode Island, or the many other bastions of antiquity he explored during his lifetime has itself become an icon of popular culture. "The Walker in the Night" by Jason C.

Eckhardt, a native Rhode Islander, draws deeply upon both that icon and the very real history of Providence—notably the tremendous New England Hurricane of September 1938, which devastated the city. Mollie L. Burleson’s “The Quest” tells of a Lovecraft-like writer who, as for so many of us today, inspires a fanatical following.

As with its predecessor, this volume ends with a long poem. We are in the midst of a tremendous renaissance of weird poetry, and H. P. Lovecraft—although substantially inferior as a poet to such of his colleagues as Clark Ashton Smith and Donald Wandrei—is at the heart of it. His *Fungi from Yuggoth* sonnet cycle continues to inspire dozens of poets, while other poets find his key themes as amenable to treatment in verse as in prose. Wade German (whose *Dreams from a Black Nebula* was one of the outstanding volumes of weird poetry of 2014) is at the forefront of the movement, and his “Lore” is a vital elaboration of the ever-fruitful “forbidden book” motif found in many recent works of Lovecraftian fiction.

Is there “too much” Lovecraftian writing out there today? The question is really not one of quantity but of quality: bad writing, in whatever amount, is always to be deprecated; but we can never have too much of good writing. The best Lovecraftian writers today use the themes, motifs, and imagery from H. P. Lovecraft’s work as springboards for their own creations. Far from being simple pastiches, such works proclaim their originality by the innovative adaptation of familiar tropes. In my mind, there has never been such a proliferation of innovative, dynamic, and imaginative treatments of Lovecraft’s work as we are seeing today, and I trust that a volume like this one presents at least a fair proportion of it.

S. T. Joshi

Plenty of Irem

JONATHAN THOMAS

Providence native Thomas has persisted in writing weird fiction amidst (or despite) such diverse livelihoods as postal clerk, artist's model, and percussionist. His collections include Midnight Call (2008), Tempting Providence (2010), Thirteen Conjurations (2013), Dreams of Ys (2015), and Naked Revenants (2017; all from Hippocampus Press). A novel, The Color over Occam (2012), is available through DarkFuse. His work has also appeared in Vampirella (Warren, 1978), PostScripts (PS Publishing, 2010), A Darke Phantastique (Cycatrix Press, 2014), Searchers After Horror (Fedogan & Bremer), and elsewhere.



THE BEGINNING OF THE END FOR KINGSPORT WAS its junior college. And by “Kingsport” I mean that grand jumble of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century structures on perennial last legs, on the rickety brink but never quite collapsing into crooked cobblestone lanes, or teetering over the waterfront as if yearning to drown lemming-like in Massachusetts Bay. Duncan Hines guides of the 1930s sang Kingsport’s praises for the more intrepid antiquarian sightseer, but lamented the absence of decent eateries. A Beaux Arts hospital and neoclassical courthouse little detracted from the overall “scenic decay” described in the ’40s by landscape painter Eric Sloane.

The postwar college campus, on the inland edge of town, also took no bite out of the historic core, but set the tone for “modernization” and “urban renewal.” By the Nixon era, Kingsport as ramshackle time capsule had been gutted for glazed brick and reinforced concrete office blocks, commercial rows, and “affordable housing,” while Eisenhower-era optimism and subsidies had ebbed away, especially from the junior college, leaving it fiscally high and dry, subject to decades of neglect, the statewide butt of snarky jokes.

Here’s where I belatedly came in, a lifer in this region, though neither I nor anybody I’d met growing up had ever been to Kingsport. Some places just emit that uninviting vibe, which was definitely the case there, whether as colonial slum or postmodern dump.

Still and all, my North Shore roots and attendant local sympathies, bona fide or not, won me the position of capital campaign manager and PR troubleshooter at Kingsport Community College, commonly abbreviated KCC. That in itself underscored the public-image problem, an acronym

that called fast-food chains to mind, a portent of graduates' tragically plausible career outlooks. Imagine my double-take on discovering the original name had been, in gratitude to its principal backers, Kingsport Freemasons' College, presumably before Southern fried chicken had made northern inroads.

To identify and promote Kingsport's residual cultural assets, fostering native pride and attracting outside interest, struck me as beneficial to both town and campus. Besides, high time I made up for my unblemished record of ignorance about the place. The lack of historical society, tourism bureau, or chamber of commerce wasn't helpful. But Monday would be my first day at KCC, so how better to combine vocation and leisure than with a data-collecting ramble the Saturday before?

From the Puritans' hilltop burial ground on the outskirts, I could see clear across the valley to the patently less bucolic cinderblock sprawl of the college. Even from this distance it projected ennui, inadequacy. Look elsewhere while the choice remained!

Amiable June breezes dispelled the pall of solemnity up here. I could have been moseying through an air-conditioned Soho gallery as I admired gravestones' carven slate hourglasses, skulls, and cherub heads, all sporting wings. Someone had come around lately with a lawnmower.

Then on the lee hillside, away from sun and civilization, I descended among markers of brown basalt, shaped like stiletto scabbards. They tilted every which way in scruffy grass as if apathy weighed on them, and were more weathered than their hilltop counterparts as if considerably older, too old for inscriptions to survive. But how could that be, when hilltop epitaphs from the 1650s lauded Kingsport's founders? A malaise of confusion chafed me harder every minute I lingered, till I climbed back into the sunshine.

Between burial hill and main drag were dowdy neighborhoods the wrecking ball had spared, but that persisted cringeworthy in their own right. To tell how old these houses were, or in what style, was impossible thanks to vinyl siding that expunged any ornament, personality, integrity, a scourge of architectural lobotomies in effect.

To cheer up I had to invade another graveyard, this one belonging to a monumental Episcopal church with square belfry, hipped roof, and Gothic windows. Unfortunately, the antiquity on the hill spoiled me for these tombstones, adorned with nothing earlier than Victorian willows-and-urns and suns ambiguously rising or setting on straight-line horizons. More intriguing to me was the decision to construct the massive Beaux Arts hospital on the other side of cemetery fieldstone wall, as if no thought had gone into the demoralizing influence of death en masse out the windows of morbidly ill patients.

The inner village was on egregiously hummocky ground, compelling a street plan of curves and switchbacks to avoid steep slopes, as if the settlers had single-mindedly built upon acres of prehistoric tumuli. Hence “old Kingsport” dictated the traffic flow of “new, improved Kingsport,” structuring it like new flesh under old bones; the prohibitive Plan B would have entailed flattening the topography. I, however, began to despair of finding Kingsport’s architectural old flesh. It inspired a pang to picture bygone appearances of streets like Frog, Mechanic, and Gingerbread.

Naturally nothing green, not the meanest crabgrass, was extant on Green Lane. But between an HMO “wellness center” with a façade like stale Triscuits and a “professional building” elegant as freshman foamcore models was crammed a miracle of preservation, easy to dismiss as a mirage of wishful thinking. Its massive proportions reminded me of a barn more than a home, as did its broad gambrel roof, in head-on outline like a longbow. A second, narrower gambrel protruded at right angle from the first, and fronted on the street.

This frontage, with paint flaking scabrously from brown clapboards and red trim, led me to wonder how archaic the house was; its upper stories overhung the sidewalk by a good six inches, like an Elizabethan vestige. And from the overhang swung a strake with woodburning-kit gilt lettering, “Mugford Museum of Quaint Kingsport.” A flagstone path, fringed by stockade fence to rebuff the neighboring HMO, led from the street, alongside the broader gambrel-end wall, to a simple peaked portico.

In a blink I was at the door, a warping assemblage of vertical planks with a latch instead of a knob. Extremely promising! I loved small-town museums, the tackier the better. Unlike too many nonprofits whose management profited royally, they tended to be bottomless money pits, ever one slippery step from receivership; a first opportunity to visit might prove the last. These seat-of-the-pants sideshows would have had to be astronomically slicker, more “respectable,” to generate the faintest blip on the radars of funding agencies. Maybe I loved them because they’d never exasperate me in a professional capacity.

I pressed on the latch and entered a period restoration, with no display cases in evidence. A hulking blanket-chest flouted domestic naturalism by blocking the staircase in the front hall. On the chest’s lid was a cracked tureen and a sign entreating ten-dollar donations. Initially I balked, but hell, I might have been that day’s sole income. Between the museum’s rabbit-hole of a location and its dearth of wherewithal to attract anyone beyond rare passersby, the owners were laboring under a double whammy. I forked over a twenty.

Where was everyone? Customers to disturb the sepulchral hush I hadn’t expected, and docents or rent-a-cops would have been reckless luxuries, but the curator surely hadn’t left both makeshift cashbox and premises at the mercy of the honor system. I hadn’t broken in, and I’d given generously, so why was I padding around like a trespasser, as if I were casing the parlor? Not my fault if the proprietor was shirking his post!

These homey surroundings were textbook authentic, yes, but banal like a paint-by-numbers copy of an Old Master and past due for Swiffers and air freshener. The obligatory features were accounted for, diamond-pane windows, ponderous corner and ceiling beams, a kettle hung on a crane in gaping fireplace, a wax effigy in bonnet, apron, and gown at a spinning wheel, two other mannequins in doublets and knee-breeches on a high-backed bench by the hearth, and against one wall, a pendulum clock flanked by two ladderback chairs. No ticking was audible, as seemed apropos, since time purportedly stood still here.

One mannequin, though, hadn't stayed put, and I staggered back, my heart bucked, and I cast up my hands palm-outward in feckless self-defense. A smile opened like a fissure in the waxy complexion of pilgrim impersonator. If his sallow skin were real, then so, I gathered, was the stringy shoulder-length gray hair; no self-respecting wig shoppe would stock such crappy merchandise. He'd sprung from the bench and crossed half the floorspace to me in the instant I took verifying the clock had stopped.

"Oh, did I make you jump?" He bowed almost fulsomely, and introduced himself as "Eldred Mugford, at your service." Jesus, was this his customary joke on the walk-in trade? Repeat business was probably a moot point anyway, and word-of-mouth too. The rest of the waxworks abided, for the duration of my nervous once-over, quiescent.

Mugford, who must have exercised eagle eyes from his hearthside perch, tendered effusive gratitude for my "liberality." Yankee sonority contained a raspy, buzzing undertone, as if cancer surgery had implanted a mechanical larynx, but the throat above broad linen collar showed no scars.

Whereas Kingsport's sourpuss pedestrians had studiously ignored me, Mugford overdid the lively solicitude, importuning my name, livelihood, mother's and grandmothers' maiden names. Every answer rated an approving nod. Finally he strode to an oval table with spindly rococo legs and procured, as first impression had it, a church-offerings plate replete with silver dollars. Was he hitting me up for more cash?

"Here's a taste of tradition for an esteemed guest," he announced, and with an exuberance that brooked no refusal, thrust under my nose the plate of coins, which close-up became a dozen mini-pancakes, white as communion wafers, on a pewter salver, its pocks and seams black with embedded soot. "They're journey cakes, or jonnycakes, a delicacy among those who predated the English forefathers."

I warily chose a specimen atop a couple of others, free of contact with the grungy pewter. Mugford didn't withdraw the salver till I was chewing. As treats went, less pasty and gritty, warm, and fresh would have been better. It tasted most like cornbread or hominy.

“I’ll take these along to munch on,” Mugford beamed, hefting the tray. “Much to see.” Was he a well-meaning eccentric or a cunning, upbeat, passive-aggressive?

He was trotting toward the front hall and, I presumed, the stairs. “Can I help you push that chest aside?” I called after him.

He stopped and eyed me quizzically before catching my drift. “We’re not going up. Nothing that way.” Really? All that space, that seventeenth-century layout, wasted? “We’re going down.” He loped over to the paneling that enclosed the area beneath the stairs and unbolted a door therein. Its upper edge reiterated the stairs’ incline and made me think of expressionist movie decor. Tray of jonnycakes in one hand, he threw a switch behind the doorframe and beckoned me into dank, unappetizing cellar updraft. Hardly archival environs for heirlooms!

Split, worn treaders instilled no confidence as they corkscrewed interminably below, but my guide traipsed away carefree, often out of sight around the next bend. He paused once and turned, and I awaited some breezy remark to encourage me along, but instead he sang out, “You’d be amazed at how long this property has been in my family!” Then he soldiered on without sharing any specifics.

Not till I’d passed a third electric Christmas candle did I observe how its niche, and this stairwell, had been chiseled from steely blue granite. What sane Puritan or Yankee descendant would have tackled such quixotic labor? Bewilderment increased an order of magnitude on the bottom step, where I wavered like an astronaut surveying an alien planet from an open airlock.

“A bit winded?” sympathized Mugford from halfway across an antechamber hacked, like the stairwell, out of onerous bedrock. “How about a couple more jonnycakes? For quick energy?” I resolutely shook my head, seeing myself choke on a dry, doughy mouthful; my throat was already constricting in the dustbin air. What’s more, Mugford’s delicacies were now direly unpalatable in the fish-belly fluorescence of tube lamps overhead. I advanced tentatively into the sallow glow, but without further understanding of where I was.

Here was the mere forecourt of multiple spaces bereft of structural rhyme or reason, lacking even the consistency to qualify as something *sui generis*, perhaps most like drunken doodling by M. C. Escher. These spaces, and still more beyond them, I could observe through three apertures set evidently at random in this anteroom, which was shaped like the inside of a collapsing pumpkin. And no less arbitrary were the frames of these apertures, a hexagon, a semicircular arch, a pair of squat columns to support ribbed vaulting that petered out shy of the ceiling's midpoint.

These spaces singly and in aggregate came across as too deformed, too inchoate to tell whether suite or catacombs or arcade had been the idea. The one certainty was of man-hours by the thousands squandered excavating. Did the results signify blindness or disdain toward basic virtues of coherence and harmony?

Meanwhile, Mugford reluctantly retracted his arm with the salver and waved with free hand to either side of me. "Well, feel free to browse through our gift selections as you collect yourself." Behind me, flanking the well of spiral stairs, were twin alcoves, crowded with rickety, backless shelves more suitable for cobwebbed homemade preserves. The shelves were rife with "gifts" that might have emerged from nineteenth-century trash pits, unwashed patent-medicine bottles, rusty horseshoes and stirrups, chipped, chintzy porcelain statuettes and saucers. Interspersed among the detritus were vintage, hand-tinted postcards of Kingsport's colonial-holdover streets and wharves and market squares, depicted woefully past their prime.

"Maybe I could concentrate better on the merchandise after we make the rounds," I feebly professed. I then discerned a shadowy mass in the cavity behind the shelves, and before I could make out any details its raggedy, limp contours explained why Mugford had concealed it. Even by his patchy standards it was overly skeevy, unfit for public view. Too bad, for what rinky-dink exhibition was complete without a ride, coin-operated or not, for the kiddies?

This one had never likely scored much kid-appeal. Diffuse illumination seeping past the shelves cast misshapen, dim strips, as of busted Venetian

blinds, upon pitted, filmy brown sculptor's wax, the same hue as ear pickings. At best guess, the effigy was of a harpy, arms in mantis position shielding crumpled breasts, mildewy leather saddle between drooping, tattered batwings. Behind the saddle were murky intimations of a feathered serpent's coils, or was it a bee's bristly, striped hindquarters? I envisaged this monstrosity as mockup for a fanciful merry-go-round, rejected even in pristine state as too nasty, too aberrant.

Mugford discreetly went "Ahem," and with a borderline patronizing flourish urged me along. Here at last were typical display cases, lined up scant inches apart along the walls like coffins in a busy mortuary. But before he'd uttered a sound, I blurted, "Whoever could have quarried all this rock?"

He shrugged as if I begged the obvious. "Our heroic ancestors, who else? Allow me to share their most precious bequeathals from our homeland, and some treasures from their voyages." He bent over the nearest case to blow off a veneer of dust, and motioned me over. I briefly grimaced at the jonnycakes amidst a flurry of airborne particles, fine new mineral gloss on sticky surfaces.

His fingertip clinked three times upon the glass. Directly below was a bowl the diameter of a cantaloupe, with ornament suggesting a rudder and a stubby prow, in silver prismatic and black with tarnish. "Here's a miniature of the unmanned boat that fetched Saint Petroc to his holy island, across the Great Ocean River east of Jerusalem. They churned these out as souvenir junk for pilgrims, yes, but now this is a priceless rarity." Great Ocean River? Where on any reality-based map was that? I had no chance to wonder because the spiel pushed on into dottier terrain.

Sidling deliberately to the next case, he pouted at the miscellany under glass till he blew off more dust and jabbed a decisive finger at a swatch of mangy black fur with sinuous gold edging and a gold clasp at each end. "Ah, here's the formal sable tiara for the grandmaster of the furrier's guild in Norumbega, not many latitudes to our north. The country's Romance language is unfortunately extinct, except for a few bills of lading. Did you know they worshipped an Abenaki solar god?"

I could scarcely mouth “No.” The struggle to wrap my head around Mugford’s alternative history, to accommodate it with all else in my corpus of knowledge, had me tongue-tied, topsy-turvy, woozy. My brow was hot and a knot throbbed in my stomach, but might these be the fault of tainted cornmeal? And there was Mugford at the next case, beckoning me forward.

He was indicating a soapstone artifact, at first impression an oil lamp, with nozzle fashioned equivocally into a camel, or hippo, or capybara head. “Now this was an offering bowl to fill with corn and bury under a stable, to curry divine blessings for the livestock. It’s from Paititi, the stronghold in Peruvian jungle the Incan hero Inkarrí legendarily built single-handed as a refuge from the Spaniards. But that’s ridiculous, of course. He couldn’t have built city walls by himself. He simply used the ones abandoned in 10,000 B.C. by the People of the Other Sun when they migrated to the Underworld.”

I followed hapless like a balloon on a string as Mugford shuffled sidelong. Overlapping my befuddlement was angst over the risk of insufficiently humoring him, ideally situated as I was to disappear forever into the same void as mermaids or Jimmy Hoffa. Nobody knew where I was, and my car was out by the town line. The knot in my stomach was tightening.

The sheer volume of curios must have been weighing on Mugford, for he began giving them short shrift, barely hesitating to toss off thumbnail descriptions. “This lump of amber came from the Gothic island of Baltia, off the Karelian coast. It contains a crab claw, which is fairly unusual. And this processional brass bell was fished out of the lake-bottom cathedral of Kitezh in Mongol-era Russia.” I’d meanwhile been brooding unduly on the non-issue of what relics were supposedly from Mugford’s homeland, and what were travel mementoes.

He wheeled on me then and thrust the salver a hairsbreadth from my cramping stomach. “You’re flagging a bit, I fear. How about a few more of these?” The proximity of oily biscuits decked with cellar crud almost made me ask if he was joking, but I dared not set him off, and only shook my diffident head.

Or had my instincts nailed the correct question? Mugford's manner consistently verged on the theatrical; maybe he actually was joking, maybe this museum was an extravagant put-on and he had nothing better to do than pull the legs of infrequent rubes. Yes, that accounted for the bulk of the daftness here, brought this whole experience down to earth, freed me from the sensation of penetrating deeper with every display case into a phantasmal world. Mugford, anyway, was nobody to accept at face value.

"Now isn't this incredible?" he enthused, recapturing my attention. How could any one item be more deserving of that understatement than any other? Yet he wasn't wrong. A petit LED spotlight starkly accented the intricacies of an orca's or T-rex tooth obsessively scrimshawed into translucent basketry, like baroque china, with a silver cap enclosing the root. I obligingly mumbled it was incredible, but Mugford was referring partly if at all to the artistry per se.

"The Tibetan monk who whittled it swore it was a demon's baby tooth from the Himalayan caves descending to the ghost-infested citadel of Agartha. He had to drill latticework throughout the enamel to drain the pulp of brimstone, which would have disintegrated the tooth eventually." Perhaps it was my disordered wits talking, but I had to admire Mugford's steamroller conviction and bonhomie. He'd have made a topnotch fundraiser, an MVP of telethon phone banks, given his prowess at gab and arrant bullshit. If I took his psychometric profile, though, would he come up a card or a psychotic?

"Ah, the jewel in the crown!" he exclaimed, on the move again, ducking through the hexagon to the next lopsided cell. What to do save bob along with wobbly-balloon passivity? He swiveled toward me as if I had yet to prove worthy of looking into the case. "Where are you from?"

"Down the road a piece in Ipswich," I volunteered, "but my job's in Kingsport."

He nodded thoughtfully. "Did you know there's also a Kingsport in Massachusetts?"

My jaw gaped for an instant like an unmanned puppet's, and I came dangerously close to countering, "Where the hell do you think we are?"

Instead I shut my mouth with a noncommittal grunt. Either he was pranking me, and I'd be fueling his amusement at my expense, or he wasn't, and I'd be challenging delusions in a soundproof de facto death chamber. And damn his power of suggestion, his blatantly addled remark that nonetheless compounded my sense of displacement into a strange world.

He scuffed back as if ceding me the benefit of some abstruse doubt, his open palm hovered over the glass, and he exhorted, "Behold!" A single object rated an entire case, like giant full-stop punctuation, as if it were its own emblem of primacy in the collection. It upped my malaise at first blink by bringing to mind a monstrous, ossified Ur-species of jonnycake. "This is too extraordinary a relic to show just anyone," he confided, "but seeing as we're related, why not?"

"Related? How?" Each time my stupefaction at one transgression against normality started wearing off, Mugford hit me with another from utmost left field. I had to affirm my host's genius, deranged or not, sinister or not, for keeping me off-balance, whatever his endgame.

He raised puckish eyebrows. "Everyone whose family's been around here long enough is related. Join me?" So saying he popped a jonnycake into his mouth and extended the salver again.

"Really, no," I demurred, training my gaze on the "extraordinary relic," figuring he'd desist with the snacks by and by.

I concluded his relic was a truncated section of ancient column from a palace or temple portico, even as he expounded, "You must appreciate the rarity, the privilege, of contemplating as much as this of resplendent Irem, City of Pillars, sunk by divine envy to the bottom of Arabia's ocean of sand, and for eons beforehand, invisible to human eyes. None of us can fully appreciate the perils to body and soul of seizing, smuggling, and enshrining it, with infernal pursuers on its scent."

Listening to Mugford's earnest rant magnified my wrenching cramps, my throbbing congestion, driving me to focus for diversion on the stonework. The dark basalt made it hard to distinguish its repeating motif, beyond basic V-outline. To block out ongoing drivel about "numinous pillars," I studied a single V more minutely till its nadir resolved into a goat

cranium, slit-pupil eyes peeking over the bottom edge, and horns stylized into helices that coiled up past the top edge. And from a groove in the horns there burst, thick as peas in a tortuous pod, the heads and forequarters of myriad tiny goats.

On some visceral level, this spectacle of rampant parthenogenesis was obscene, repellant. But since it was nowise salacious, I couldn't justify, let alone articulate, my disgust. "I can tell you're profoundly touched," Mugford empathized, "as are we all. No need to be self-conscious. You're among friends. What a unique trace of obliterated majesty!"

Not only had he grossly misread my expression; I might also have accused him of imperfect candor. Recently I'd come across rock of that same brown, and ransacking the day's memories gave me ample cause to doubt Mugford's chunk of Irem was unique. But catching him in a lie, if that's what it was, only backfired, for it tipped me toward lending more credence to the phantom city's reality.

Whether from Irem or wherever, plenty of that basalt languished by the town line, on the lee slope below the gravesite of Kingsport's Anglo founders. In hindsight, eroded, blunt fingers of stone readily passed for sad splinters of once-mighty columns. Centuries of storms and frost would have eradicated any carvings. What the hell had Anglo founders made of that hillside littered with cenotaphs, scoured blank already or not, and of the people responsible for them, and most puzzling, who were those people, those jonnycake fanciers, if not Native Americans?

Their absence from Puritan records may have argued against their actuality, reducing the hillside to an ignoble potter's field, or may have designated them too odious for written mention. I was steeling myself to ask who Mugford's people allegedly were, but he was sighing, "Alas for the rootbound glory that can nevermore sprout and flourish upon the earth!" His lament was palpably heartfelt, which hardly lessened its ring of pathologic litany. All his bric-a-brac and rubbish now amounted to sacred fetishes in a cult of one.

Between the lines I glimpsed a possible insight into Mugford's psyche, a mundane interpretation of this farcical museum. Mad as he decidedly was,

that madness may have functioned as a happier alternative for a fragile, devoted antiquarian, a sanctuary from the wasteland his beloved, venerable hometown had become. I was sorry for him even as I took increased care to pussyfoot around him.

Then his drone of gloom and despair exploded into elation, which perversely intensified my cramps and giddiness, as he trumpeted, "But be of good cheer! Revelation is ours!" His grating mechanical undertone grew harsher and more prominent with each syllable, as if slipping from his control. And at that unguarded juncture, my forearm was suddenly in his unnaturally cool, dry grip as he tried tugging me toward a portal, impeccably round as a punchcard hole, committing me to yet another remove from the rightside-up world.

Frowning uncertainly at my alarm, he relented, though without letting go, merely to proffer the tray again. "I recommend you have some more of these, to enhance the experience."

I shook my head, and pressed my lips together as if he weren't above forcing jonnycakes past them.

"No? As you wish," he conceded, disapproval writ plain across chalky complexion. For once he sounded like an everyday professional guide as he reluctantly unhanded me to duck through the portal and high-step over its inch of threshold, and fan me toward him, intoning, "Mind your feet, mind your head."

I gambled that indulging him was still the safer course. Let's get this "revelation," this well-entombed *pièce de resistance*, out of the way, after which he'd have no further excuse to detain me, right? He'd emerged a sympathetic character after all, a victim of the crass modernity that had rendered quality of life impossible for him in Kingsport, as it had for uncounted others of his disposition elsewhere, if not everywhere.

In accord with the unreason I'd come to expect down here, this most cramped, low-ceilinged cell so far, this putative hindmost recess, felt more like a foyer than the foyer itself. It was also the brightest, and its entire rear wall was a dazzling, milky screen of incandescence. I averted my

overwhelmed pupils and reeled at a fresh renewal of that shock I'd weathered when Mugford had revealed he wasn't a mannequin.

For two of her to exist, when one was too many, beggared belief, but it absolutely couldn't be the same retired chimera from behind "gift shop" shelves; this had to be another moldering wax harpy. Bathing her in ivory light failed to soften scarred, leprous surfaces or help me identify component species. And worse, in these confines, the festering leather of shabby saddle was within sniffing range, spurring my upset stomach toward conniptions. Nor was this a simple assault. At my next breath, a whiff of rancid cornmeal, fermented sewage, slimy mushrooms infiltrated the bouquet, threatening to bowl me over.

I coughed and gasped and realized the infiltration was taking over, displacing the rotten leather funk and proceeding not from the sculpture, but from the wall of radiance behind me. I turned involuntarily toward Mugford, puffy-sleeved arms outspread as if to hug the wall as he exulted, "When we can sever earthly tethers, when the other side is clear and unwavering, we can soar home again! Paradise regained!"

Yes, the brilliant haze had thinned to impart a shimmering vista, but how could Mugford see what I was seeing and act so jubilant about it? The foreign world to which he'd slyly escorted me, and ballyhooed like a promised land, fit no human idea of paradise. Or was my distorted vision the problem? At the very least my sense of scale, of perspective, was out of whack, for the rippling glare, the background murk left me guessing whether I surveyed a canyon or a cavern. Or was it a microcosm enlarged, the innards of a capacious geode or a modest sinkhole that teemed with fleshy worms?

But if this was an empire of ordinary worms, squirming orgiastic around fingerling stalagmites, basking around oily puddles that receded toward clouded horizon, how to explain the hundredfold human carcasses half-sunk among them and of equal or lesser length? Whatever occult window or projection screen or hypnotic talent Mugford had, hadn't he just implied I could, under proper conditions, physically transition into his "paradise"?

It was a permeable enough membrane, anyway, for sickening miasma to leach in, along with a sibilant drone as of surf, or chanting, or mastication, indefinable but as sickening as the odor, and most unnerving, of the same raspy pitch as Mugford's. And to judge by toxic atmosphere, and by the human remains, nothing but death would receive me over there, and who or what was he to expect otherwise?

I'd peripherally noted that courteous Mugford and his jonnycakes had retreated, ceding me space in which to gawk appropriately awestruck. Still, I wasn't comfortable leaving him to his own devices, and strove to bring him slowly, casually into view. He was leaning over the harpy, cupped hand to his mouth, whispering, I didn't care what; the bare fact of talking to her demonstrated how much more unhinged he was than I'd already inferred, how much more potentially volatile. I shifted from foot to foot, scarcely reining in my urge to bolt.

And though I conjectured right away the flickering glow may have fostered the illusion, that didn't stop me racing headlong when I witnessed pocky wax head cocking an ear to hear Mugford better. In my panic I forgot his warning about the low doorway, smacked into it at hairline level, and crumpled like a poleaxed heifer. The back of my skull hit the stone floor.

I clung to semiconsciousness, in hypnogogic stupor, phasing in and out of clockface time. Clumsy mitts fumbled at my collar, undoing buttons past the breastbone. An instant or maybe minutes later, Mugford was apologizing, "My mistake! This should never have happened. His behavior should have tipped me off. Imagine, turning up his nose at journey cakes! Any of us would know damn well you can't look beyond without a bellyful! Not with a jot of clarity! That pedigree of his was so misleading." He heaved a weary sigh. "Optimism played me for a fool."

Squinting through the blurry, pulsing keyhole of my awareness, I was thankful to ascertain Mugford wasn't conferring with a wax chimera. But this conferee was scant improvement, studying me from under a bonnet that blotted out her face so thoroughly I entertained doubts there was a face; when last I'd seen this bonnet, it was on a mannequin upstairs.

A knuckle was thumping my chest. “Feel that? It’s solid. No vent. You can actually hear a heart beating inside.”

The voice from under the bonnet buzzed more harshly than Mugford’s, past the frontiers of comprehension.

“I’ll handle it,” he pledged. Then a spark of indignation no sooner flared up in me than it guttered. Mugford, damn him, had covered my eyes with jonnycakes like dead man’s pennies, and whether they or emotional overload were to blame, I short-circuited into oblivion.

I had no luck blinking away the merciless sunshine, or pressing against uncompliant backrest into shady refuge. I accepted with euphoric post-blackout grace my revival seated among the tilted brown basalt markers, as if I’d never decamped from the hillside. But at the realization one of those obelisks was propping me up, my skin crawled and I staggered to my feet.

Mugford’s nightmarish museum, details of which were recurring to me in kaleidoscopic onslaught, had positively been no dream. His parting jonnycakes were nowhere on the nearby ground, though what else could explain the viscous, grainy rings around my eyes? More damnably, my hair and heels and shirttails and trousers from butt to cuffs were caked in sticky mud, and I smarted all over, as if a hasty or unskillful party had dragged me through earthen tunnels. As for crosstown wormhole’s trapdoor exit, through which, I was inflexibly convinced, I’d arrived here, searching for it, even dwelling on it, would have wasted time better spent fleeing to my car.

On Monday, of course, I reported to KCC and took over as chief fundraiser. I needed the gig; a no-brainer, that. So was my aversion to venturing farther into town than the campus, from whose drab, soulless cinderblocks and treeless paved courtyards I derived comfort and serenity. I never reflect on how my sentiments about loutish modernity have changed. I function, I’m solvent, and any deviation from smooth sailing would be stupid.

I did once deviate and learned my lesson. A shortcut to the cafeteria brought me to an organic garden behind the biosciences lab. The smell of freshly turned loam gave me vertigo, and that of frisky, clumping worms disinterred by the rototiller was, I swear, even more unbearable, like

cornbread spoiling in the rain. It was all I could do to shamble along, and fight the urge to ask the kids sowing seeds whether they too could hear the worms chorusing, in the same buzzy register as Mugford's, how they envied me my peek into their realm beyond.

Diary of a Sane Man

NICOLE CUSHING

Shirley Jackson Award finalist Nicole Cushing has written multiple stand-alone novellas and dozens of short stories. Several of her stories have been selected as honorable mentions for Ellen Datlow's Best Horror of the Year series. Her first full-length short story collection, The Mirrors, and her first novel, Mr. Suicide, both appeared in 2015. She lives with her husband in Indiana.

FEB 3, 2:00 A.M.



SOMETHING VERY PECULIAR JUST HAPPENED DURING my nightly walk: I was overwhelmed by a sense that my neighborhood was twisting itself into something sinister.

Peculiar, indeed. My wife, our sons, and I have lived here for five years and have always felt safe. There has never, to our knowledge, been a crime on this street—not even a case of vandalism or petty theft. This neighborhood is home to good people. The right kind of people, you might say. Established lawyers (like my wife), established academics (like myself), and a few over-mortgaged newlyweds thrown into the mix—just to keep things lively.

It's true that walking around the neighborhood at night, as is my custom, has sometimes triggered feelings of loneliness (when what I wanted instead was solitude and a brief respite from beckoning calls of "Honey..." and "Dad!"). I've grown uneasy while pacing the dark, deserted streets. When a car rolls past me, I sense I'm given strange looks. *What's he doing outside, at this time of night, walking?* I suppose the driver is thinking to herself.

When I was a kid, people used to spend more time outside. In weather like this, there'd be a snowman on every corner. Now there are no snowmen. Kids spend their days hovering over screens instead of playing in the snow. *Everyone* spends their days hovering over screens. There is perhaps no more forlorn place than a suburban street at midnight.

But even when I've felt alone out there, I've never fallen to pieces the way I did earlier tonight. I've always been able to reassure myself that any

phantoms were strictly products of my mind; that, in a matter of hours, the sun would again gleam over shiny cars. Giggling children would again emerge from our front doors. The usual hum of everyday activity would continue.

So why, tonight, did I sense an intrusive element of strangeness in the streets?

I blame the snow.

It arrived last night, continued through the morning, and only paused briefly in the mid-afternoon before beginning anew. I was stuck at home with the kids all day because their school had canceled classes and Becca had left town for a conference two days before. I was supposed to be working on an article, but I just couldn't concentrate as they whooped and yelled and—this was a new one—*cussed* their way to video game victory. So, instead, I just stood by the window of my home office and watched the flakes fall.

The wind howled, making a visible, swirling current through the white air. Then the current would erratically change direction. Smack the snow right up against my window. And then, after a minute or two, it would change *again* to make it smack against the windows of the family across the street.

Maybe the whole thing fascinated me because I'm usually so absorbed in my work that I can never enjoy something as simple as snowfall. Maybe I liked it because I admired the way it changed the neighborhood. Everyone's landscaping and front-yard decorations were hidden now, under a uniform white cast. The cars were hidden, too. The snow made it impossible to differentiate the houses with Escalades parked outside them from those that could boast only Scions.

In other words, the snow was a leveling force. The democrat in me liked that. I was never one for status symbols. I had no interest in keeping up with the Joneses (despite Becca's opinions to the contrary).

As the snow piled onto itself out there, inch after inch, I smiled. *Tonight's walk will be a special treat*, I thought. I just sat there and watched it all day, letting the article go to hell. I didn't move from my spot until the

boys jogged into my office, begging me to make them dinner. I snapped at them and told them that if they were old enough to cuss, they were old enough to make their own damned dinner. Then I watched out the window some more. It was just too beautiful, and I deserved a break.

And so, after I confirmed the boys had made themselves bowls of cereal (and after I confirmed—hours later—they were asleep), I put on my coat and gloves and slipped outside.

At first, the whole thing lifted my spirits. The experience met—indeed, exceeded—my expectations. The snowfall tickled my face, like a lover's finger. There was something about the cold's bite that felt pleasant, like a love nibble. There are whole stretches of winter months in which I gravitate toward brooding, and during these months I experience long periods of mental numbness. So feeling something—even something usually considered unpleasant, such as the smack of cold wind—was revitalizing.

The smell of burning wood wafted through the air, and this struck me as refreshingly old-fashioned, even primal. If one was going to keep a fire going, one could not keep one's eyes glued to a screen. So each wisp of smoke escaping from a chimney gave me confidence that all wasn't lost.

Looking further up from the chimneys, I saw the full moon. It reflected off the snow in such a way as to make things brighter than night but duller than day. More like daytime-during-an-eclipse than night.

No plows had been through the neighborhood, and the snow reached up to the bottom of my calf. But this didn't discourage me. Quite the opposite; it excited me. *Maybe this was just what I needed to inspire myself*, I thought. A harsh winter. A *real* winter. Something, anything, to excite *feelings* within me again.

The houses, as usual, were unlit at that time of night. Everyone had to go to bed early so they could go to their jobs and schools the next day.

My breath formed a thick, short cloud in front of me, and I felt like a chugging train—unstoppable on my suburban track. But then, as I turned the corner to another side street, I slipped, wobbled, and—

“Whuh!”

—landed hard.

My face felt sore and cut, but I found no blood on the snow.

A porch light came on. I let out a whimper and worked to get back on my feet. This doesn't really make sense, but I didn't want to be discovered that way. I know that slipping and falling on ice and snow isn't a moral failing, but something about the whole thing just felt deeply uncomfortable. Who wants to be seen out in public, groveling on the ground?

I scrambled back on to my knees and crept over to a less icy stretch of the street. Looked over to the house with the shining light. Saw no one poking their head outside. Saw no one at the window, looking out at me.

Had they already determined I wasn't hurt and averted their glance back to their fire (or favorite screen)? Had no person looked out of the house at all? Had I just tripped off a motion sensor?

I found myself stuporously staring at the light, as though it would reveal the answer. The longer I studied it, the more unusual I found it. A distorting haze made an uneven halo around it. If I tilted my head to the right, the haze seemed less prominent. If I tilted it to the left, the light seemed monstrously exaggerated, like a glowing tumor. Likewise, when I tilted my head to the right, a bench on the front porch cast an unremarkable shadow. But when I tilted my head to the left, the shadow wasn't black but rather *rose-tinted* and—this is going to sound deranged—*pulsing*.

I let out a wail, then became self-conscious of how odd that must sound in this subdivision, where no wail had ever been heard. So I placed my glove to my mouth to muffle the uncouth sound.

All this was frightening enough; but then, something worse happened. The *air* turned against me. For starters, it took on a foul odor, as though it wasn't merely *wood* that burned in my neighbors' hearths. Next, the cold air smacked my face. Gripped my face. Squeezed my face. When I finally rose to my feet, the wind mischievously decided to bind my legs together, forcing me to shuffle through my walk with the rigor-mortis gait of a zombie.

And the moon...

The moon!

I had a sense that it wasn't the sphere I'd been taught it was. Instead, it was a single, filmy white eye. A blind eye, but one that was beginning to gather strength so that it could cure itself and begin spying on me. A series of wispy clouds floated just over and under it. These, I understood, were the lashes and lids of the blind eye. And then the moon-eye *spoke* in a voice like shrill violins. "Beyond-yond! Beyond-yond!"

A horrible voice. I covered my ears, but not before it spoke again.

"Beyond-yond!"

It was a single blind eye. It could not even *see*. But it knew I was down there. It knew, and—somehow, in a rebellion against all known biology—*spoke* to me.

There was something more wicked in the air than mere winter.

Mere snow wouldn't have made my chest feel so empty, as though its contents had been hollowed out. Mere wind wouldn't have resulted in the heaviness of my head, as though its contents had taken on twice their normal weight. Mere cold wouldn't have set drums to beating inside my brain and jugular.

None of these things should change people, the way they seemed to be changing me. And they *were* changing me.

If anyone should ever stumble upon this journal, you may think my fall resulted in a head injury. And I do not rule out the possibility that I am on the verge of something that could be called madness. But don't let that lead you to think me unreliable! To the contrary, I feel I'm more reliable now than ever. The fall, if it did anything, knocked sense into me.

I know more about the way the world works than I ever did before. Moreover, I use logic far more effectively than I ever have. See, for example, how easily I bring logic to bear to prove my worst suspicions.

My syllogism:

A. The world is changing in a hideous way.

B. I am *a part of the world*, therefore

C. I am *changing in a hideous way*.

Given what I've described above, A. and B. should be taken as axioms. Therefore, the unavoidable conclusion is C.

I thought that writing this all down would somehow purge it from my memory—that I could get it out of my mind, so I could move on to being a good father and husband. But I fear that the result may be quite the opposite. After going for that walk, I have no interest in ever seeing Becca again. ~~My boys seem, more than ever, a regrettable distraction.~~

My god, what did I just write?

No, I can't say that. I was wrong. I would never regret my sons. They're the most important things in my life. They're what make me get out of bed in the morning! It's just that, after I came back into the house and wiped the fog off my glasses, I realized my world had changed. The blind eye in the sky, the rose-tinted shadows, the smell of... something other than wood... spewing from chimneys—*those* strike me as real.

These walls, this desk, this chair in which I sit, this pen with which I write, this hand that holds the pen—all *these* seem ephemeral.

FEBRUARY 3, 5:17 A.M.

Tried to fall asleep, but couldn't. Becca's absence didn't bother me (no, in fact, I was actually *relieved* she was gone). The problem was simply that the bed was too creaky. More than creaky. I couldn't shake the feeling that I was resting on something that might sublimate into a plume of smoke at any moment. I had this strange expectation that a giant hand might penetrate the roof and grab me; that the giant hand might be revealed to belong to a child, and that I might be revealed to be just one of her dolls.

The house felt too unstable to dwell in. I felt the need to live in a more durable reality.

I bundled up. Went outside. A new development emerged: no matter which way I turned my head, the shadows were deep red and pulsing. The

snowfall no longer gently tickled my face, but instead stung like flying pins. The air had grown ever more frigid and fetid, the wind more sadistic in its smacking. The winter had plans to bring me to my knees, of that I had no doubt. And I—

I felt, for the first time, the stirring of submission. I *wanted* to surrender myself to it, not because I valued self-abasement but because I suspected that there was something just beyond surrender that would be far more worthwhile than my present situation. So I proceeded, knowing that I would be broken.

The street wasn't merely slippery. Parts of it actually collapsed as I tread on it. Sinkholes. Yet no car alarms went off amid the crashing and rumbling. No panic ensued. The neighborhood still (somehow) slept. An instinct for self-preservation guided me to avoid falling into the first sinkhole I encountered, but I didn't evade the second. It sprang up too quickly. Seemed to have been *aiming* for me. There was a loud cracking and then down, down, I plummeted—shrieking—to a depth approximating that of a grave.

I was sprawled there, unable to move. Overhead, the blind eye of the moon shone. Only it no longer looked quite so blind. In the middle of it, I saw a dull orange circle, like fire trapped just below ice. Thin clouds lingered round the upper and lower portions of it, like lids and lashes.

Was I dead?

Dying?

The moon-eye spoke. The voice was a tangled mess of screeches, croaks and giggles. All laughing toads and violins. "Beyond-yond. Beyond-yond! To be sane is to be dead. To have a job is to be dead. To be married is to be dead. To own a home is to be dead. To have a child is to be dead. But there is hope, if one dares venture beyond sanity. In madness there is life! To be insane is to be quite special. The insane, you see, are the spearheads of human evolution!"

The voice then went on to explain to me that human scientists were always trying to find out what differentiates *Homo sapiens* from the rest of the animal kingdom. Originally, they thought humans were distinguished

by their ability to make tools. Then Jane Goodall had to burst that bubble by filming chimps using sticks and stones as crude tools in the wild. Since then, lots of theories have arisen and been disproved. But the reality is that *the capacity for madness* is the only thing that sets us apart from the animals!

It's so simple, it should be obvious to anyone! The police have to drag homeless madmen off the streets in winter, but you don't ever see *grizzly bears* on the streets in the subzero cold—do you? No, they have good enough sense to hibernate! Likewise, snails don't fancy themselves to be Napoleon. Walruses don't don tinfoil to keep away Martian thought-control rays. Insanity is the province of humanity alone. Therefore, insanity is the launching pad to one's further evolution to something *better* than human.

"To be sane," the moon-eye said, "means to have one's mind firmly chained to the mental constructs of the human species. What a limited frame of reference! It means looking through the same pair of glasses your fellows look out of, and seeing exactly the same things. It means insisting that a house is a solid object, when in fact it's a massive swarm of tiny, moving ones. It means succumbing to sleep for one-third of one's existence. It means succumbing to the need to shove things into one's mouth several times a day to refuel. It means succumbing to aging, illness, and death!

"It means succumbing to the nature of man as a hierarchical social mammal, succumbing to immersion in the boiling pot of competition over limited resources. It means yielding to authority, pulling over when some dolt in a police uniform turns on a siren and pulls up behind you. It means always knowing your place in the pecking order. It means always posturing for position.

"It means suffering the distraction-of-attraction to other members of the species and succumbing to mating impulses, so that the whole thing perpetuates itself, *ad infinitum*! This life—this sane life—is false life. You must move on to something better. You didn't have the luxury of being born insane. Therefore you must *make* yourself insane, to break the chains that bind you to human limitation! Here, slave—allow me to give you just a taste of freedom!"

And the cloud-lashes of the moon-eye began to grow into tendrils that descended from the sky. And I whimpered. They wrapped around me and yanked me—like a bungee cord—out of the sinkhole-grave and up to the moon-eye itself. And I screamed. Then they pushed me, with great force, into the pale moon, past the crusty, cratered surface and into the dull orange fire underneath. And I wailed.

And this dimension underneath the moon's surface fully engulfed me, the way a finger gently pressed atop an ant would seem to engulf it. And I looked down at my arms and they seemed to not be flesh at all, but... wax, melting from great heat. And I screamed, until my throat started to melt. And I whimpered, until my lips started to melt. And then I was no longer "I," but a collective. And we were racing round in a circle, counterclockwise, like a school of drunken fish. We were the rings of Saturn. We were the Kuiper Belt. We were the whirling arms of the Milky Way.

Then we were something beyond, in some *place* beyond. A place where the only sense was—it's so hard to explain, for those of you who've never experienced it—a sort of hybrid between smell and touch. And there was no social mammal hierarchy. No faculty committee meetings. No departmental politics to play. No articles to write. And there was no hunger or sleep. But there was something like emotion. Euphoria, such as I've never known before. The euphoria of a dog straining at its leash, who finally breaks its master's hold.

NEXT ENTRY, UNDATED, AS DATES REFER TO A CONSTRUCT OF TIME WHICH IS BENEATH ME

I don't know what happened.

One moment I was evolved and the next I descended back into a man. And as I came to, the gravelike sinkhole healed itself to the point it was only a pothole. I picked myself up off the street and came back to my

dwelling structure. I wept the entire way home, grieving my tumble down the evolutionary ladder.

Anyway, the female mate I mistakenly acquired years ago used her communication device to try and reach me. I wouldn't answer. Then she used her communication device to contact our oldest offspring, and he wouldn't leave me alone until I let him in to this private dwelling area of mine. He shoved his chubby, peanut-butter-stained, monkey paw into my face, showing me his communication device. He demanded I grant his mother time to speak with me.

Her breath on the other end whipped up crackles of static. She was obviously upset. I told her to leave me alone.

"What's wrong, honey? You don't sound like yourself."

"And a good thing, too," I said. "I'm through with being human. Through with eating and shitting and sleeping and shoving my ridiculous monkey appendage inside of your ridiculous monkey hole!"

At first, she offered a nervous giggle. But when I didn't laugh along with her, she started to become more disturbed. "Wha-wha—Jason? Jason, is that really you?"

"Sort of," I said (to hint at my recent start along the evolutionary path).

"What's wrong with you? Are you drunk?"

"Yes, on evolution, you stinky monkey!"

Ha! I actually said that to her! And then, predictably, she started flipping out. Of course, she started flipping out.

"Jason, wh-what's wr-wr-wrong with you?" And then, when I just listened to her without offering any response, the tears started.

Ah, yes. The tears! (Such an integral part of the hardwiring of the female.) *I must find out what's wrong with him*, she must have thought, *because I'm so worried and heartbroken*. Little did she suspect that her tears were mere smoke belched out of the engine of mammalian evolution!

Her thoughts, as translated into the language of evolution, must have sounded something like this: *My mate has said very un-mate-like things to me. I need my mate to provide resources and to care for our young. For them to*

obtain status in the hierarchy and acquire a desirable mate of their own, my young will need to attend one of the right colleges. My mate has access to reduced tuition for his offspring at the college at which he's employed (which is one of the right colleges). Ooo-ooo-eee-eee-ooo-ooo-ooo!

I could hear eons of human evolution at work in her little monkey brain, grunting and shrieking. I could hear it, but she couldn't. What a riot!

Then I hung up on her and shoved the phone back into my little monkey-offspring's hand. Pushed him out of my office. "Just go now. Play some more video games so you can hone your aggressive instincts!" And he looked at me as if I were a stranger. As if I weren't his father. And I was *thrilled*. Because, that must mean I'm transforming into something better than a father. Something beyond mating instincts and offspring-raising. Something beyond human.

I aspire to meditate until I induce a trance. With luck, I'll be able to summon forth another experience of the beyond! Once more, I'll melt into a better species. This time, hopefully, for good!

FEBRUARY 3, 11:56 P.M.

I begin to have doubts about all this "evolution" business. Several new pieces of evidence have presented themselves, all of them troubling.

- 1 My trance this afternoon was completely uneventful. Just a zoned-out meditation. When I emerged, I felt the need to urinate. I waited and waited, hoping the sensation would pass. I should have been beyond such bodily functions. I thought I'd surely evolved at least that much! But then I could no longer hold it. Like a toddler, I was losing control of my bladder. I felt the warm sensation in my pants and smelled the ammonia-like stench, and then I hurried to the toilet to fish out my ridiculous appendage and relieve myself.
- 2 I noticed that my beard stubble had grown. I was still subject to such mammalian experiences!

- 3 I felt hungry. I waited, hoping this would pass. It did not. I resorted to making myself a sandwich to quell the rumblings of my belly. To have to deal with the realities of salivation and smacking lips was truly humiliating.
- 4 I re-read this diary. That earlier entry, in which the moon lifted me up onto it, and through it, seems a bit much. Yes, even I can look at it now and deduce that I simply dreamed the whole thing. Or imagined it. In any event, it does not read as an objective, scientific record (or even like an objective diary). It reads—at best—like the record of a hallucination. Take, for example, that long speech the so-called moon-eye uttered, about all the burdens of being human—there's no way 4 could have remembered it in that much detail. At best, I could have only paraphrased it. And yet there it is, written as though I were transcribing from a tape recorder.

But, then again, there's no way to deny that I've absorbed certain truths during this whole ordeal. Everyone I love, I love only because *I'm wired by evolution* to love them. Love is a series of monkey-chemicals that are there to direct our mating and the care of offspring. Extended family ties are only there to ensure survival of the monkey-group in catastrophes.

There's truth in all this. I've had such thoughts, even before the moon-eye spoke to me. But one can't go through life obsessing about them. One has to be practical. Who cares if love is just a matter of wiring?

One can't let oneself think too much about these things. One has to be practical.

I may have been enlightened about things, but I've not been practical.

It would seem as though I've made quite a mess of my life, in just a brief time. I need to call Becca and let her know I'm OK. That I'm sorry. Poor Becca. She must be worried sick! After I call her, I need to take a hot shower and shave. I'll feel better after that. Then maybe go out and take another walk. Looks like we've had a break from the snow. This time, I'll do a better job of watching my step. I'll not slip.

GRADUATION DAY

Well, that didn't go well. When I called Becca, I was concerned I might wake her up. But that should have been the least of my worries. She was very much awake and spewed a great deal of venom my way. "Something was *wrong* with you earlier. You were drunk, weren't you? Admit it! Ian said you've been acting weird. You didn't even make them dinner! Anyway, I'm on my way back."

"I'll be waiting for you, dear," I said, trying to smooth things over. "Now that your conference is over, we'll be able to enjoy some quality time together."

And she said something like this: "Damn it, Jason, don't you understand! The conference *isn't* over. That's the whole point. I was supposed to do a presentation tomorrow, but your fuckups are making me have to cancel it. It's clear I can't even trust you to take care of the kids while I'm out of town. When I get home, we're going to have a talk about this—a good, long talk. The things you said to me... do you realize what an asshole you were? And, while we're at it, your flakiness might have just cost me the vice chair position of the state Bar Association. Do you have any idea how long I've worked to get in line for that? The chair flew out to this convention, too, and was telling me how he was going to sit in on my presentation, and now it must look as if I'm flaking out. But *you're* the one who's flaking out! And while we're on the subject of flaking out, let me ask you this: Have you made any more progress on that article? You know the deadline's coming up, right? If you want to gun for department chair, you need to mind your p's and q's."

I wanted to mend fences with her. Honestly, I did! But how can you take someone seriously when they insist on making nothing but monkey, monkey, monkey sounds! Positions. Social primate hierarchy. Taking care of our young. Provision for their nutrition and rearing. She was talking about our careers in the academy and the law, but all I heard was "Ooo-oo-ahh-ahh-ooo-ooo-ooo!"

I couldn't stop giggling. She didn't like that, but so what? What else are you supposed to do when a human female makes monkey noises to you on the phone? Then I changed the subject.

"So where are you now?"

"Still at the airport. My flight's been delayed, of course."

"Delayed?"

"Yeah. You know, the next storm? Are you so much of a space cadet that you haven't heard the news? It's supposed to cover seven states, including the one you're sitting in. Here we've already gotten dumped on. But the Weather Channel says it's moving east. It should be just starting back home. It's forecasted to be even bigger than the last one."

I looked out of my office window. Glanced at a street lamp to see if the snow had reached us yet. There, I saw the first flecks drifting down the black sky. There, I saw a strange halo form around the light. It seemed monstrously exaggerated, like a glowing tumor—a tumor that had metastasized to consume not only the light, but also all the air within a five-foot radius, then a ten-foot radius, then a fifteen-foot radius. And a car slowly crept past my house. And it was swallowed up in the light-cancer. And Becca kept chattering—

"Ooo-ooo-ooo-eee-reee-REEE-REEE-ooo-oo!"

—but I had no more monkey sounds left to offer her.

If I were still an ordinary human, I would have felt annoyed by her yammering. But, instead, I felt grateful that she flaunted her primate attributes over the phone. That, I believe, granted the necessary final push to quicken my transformation. For now I *know* she's dead to me. The house is dead to me. The offspring are dead to me. The dean of my college is dead to me. All the faculty are dead to me. All bipedal monkeys—with their ridiculous appendages and ridiculous holes—are dead to me.

They're dead, and I want to live.

And so I put down the phone without even hanging up. And I got out this journal, and I started writing this.

The youngest offspring is pounding on the door now. "Daaaad, open the door." And when I tell him to fuck off, he starts *bawling*. "Daaaaad, o-o-

open the doooooor!” And, for a moment, I feel this urge to make everything all better for him. To go out and reassure him. Then I remember that’s only my wiring talking to me. His tears are only smoke belching forth from the engine of evolution. And I tell the little shrieking monkey to go fuck himself.

And now the metastasizing lamplight is penetrating the walls of this house. My suspicions were right. It is too unstable to dwell in!

I hear laughing toads and violins. “Beyond-yond!”

And now all voices drift away, and the only sensation I have is that my hands are so warm.

And now, even *that sensation* is lost to me (or, rather, altered). And the only sense I possess is a sort of *hybrid* of smell and touch.

And oh... now... oh, yes! My hands! They’re mel—

The Woman in the Attic

ROBERT H. WAUGH

(For Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar)

Robert H. Waugh is now a professor emeritus of the English Department of SUNY New Paltz. He has published poems in several literary journals, as well as publishing two books of poems with Codhill Press, Shoreward, Tideward, and Thumbtacks, Glass, Pennies. In addition he has published two books on the works of H. P. Lovecraft with Hippocampus Press, The Monster in the Mirror and A Monster of Voices; for that press a collection of his weird tales appeared in 2016, with the title The Bloody Tugboat and Other Witcheries.

[The editor of the following narrative takes full responsibility for the order of its paragraphs and thereby for their meaning and drift; they were written upon torn pieces of paper, with no indication of the intentions of the author. Also, in several cases the writing was almost illegible, so I have had to decipher the words, a great shame when we consider how beautiful the hand often was until the end—HPL.]



MY HUSBAND MR. GARDNER DID NOT MEAN TO DO what he did, putting me away as he did; I can't believe that he truly meant it, because if he did mean that then our marriage was a sham, and pointing at that stone and its colors will never mean different. I mean, it really does mean something, penning your wife in the attic because you feel certain as hell that she is mad or sick or infected. No message from heaven, no sly suggestion from hell, can ever tell us different—and the stone, whether it came from the heaven beyond the stars or from the hell beyond the stars, can tell us no different neither. The stone is indifferent to the matter. But I was not mad and not sick, though no doubt I did not look very good. My sons, never to mince words, said I was crumbly. Mr. Gardner has not let me have a mirror, no doubt out of kindness.

There's also this problem of language. There's no doubt that Mr. Gardner and I have different languages: we even spoke Babel in our courtship. And now that I am dying in the attic the stone has put a tilt on my tongue. I think that I understand Mr. Gardner, but there is no way that he can understand me, not any more.

So that's why I have to tell my side of the story. Mr. Lovecraft the surveyor tried to tell it as truthfully as he could, but he was an outsider, so he could never know the story as it truly fell out; and of course though he was a surveyor he was also a writer and slanted certain details for the greatest effect—given his audience, which no doubt consisted mainly of young pimply boys and a few men. Only I, scribbling here in the attic as fast as I can, know the truth of the matter and why it is so bitter. Because the marriage does mean something and something real. That's why this life hurts.

This is despite me and Ammi. I'm sure most people in the valley know what to think about that. Mr. Gardner and our three sons would go out to hoe and to plow and to plant. They would be out in the fields the live-long day at work on the good earth that was soon to be polluted; and Ammi, who had no good earth in the upland that he owned, would do the best that he could with the land, then leave it to the crows and saunter down to visit us. But there'd be no body here to visit but me. And I was happy to see him. You understand, you.

Is that why I'm raging up here, up here in the attic all alone?

It's not just here all alone. It's my skin flaking off and my brain flaking off. You've noticed that, haven't you, Mr. Gardner, the skin and the brain flaking off at your feet, so I won't see you again. Go preach me to the congregation in your mincing, pious way. They will know why I'm up here and why Ammi is not up here and why Mr. Gardner only visits me with my one meal, my one dreadfully skimpy, one meal, once a day. He was never very good in the kitchen so that's OK, and never very rich in his largesse to the chickens either. Bock bock, bock bock, says I. Anyway, I'm looking rather good if you can look past the flaking, the crumbling. I'm svelte and lean, in a way I never could manage after giving birth to three strapping sons, an honor to their father I'm sure.

If these were the good old days they would duck me in the pond, duck me and duck me; they would shout hurray and hurrah. Deep down they would like to burn me and have done with me, but they also think ducking would be so much better, truly, my clothes clinging to my hips and breasts, and everything that Ammi and I did something they could almost see. Ammi. I could never bring myself to call him Mr. Pierce except in public, where of course I had to. Even a woman of scarlet has to obey the particulars.

But I'm just a woman on the edge. That's what you would say, I know, and soon enough it will all flake from me, skin and brain—my bones will crack, my neck will break, and then I won't matter at all. Will they bother to shovel me into a grave?

Are we only talking about that stone that fell from heaven? The morning that it fell it shook the ground, the air screamed and we went out to see what the noise was all about. Mr. Gardner and the boys were already up, and I was up too, making up the flapjacks, bacon, and eggs; but after they ate and went to the fields and I had washed the dishes in the sink under the pump, then I went to the stone. There it lay, steaming in the crater it had blasted next to our pitiful well. I put my right hand on its colors but could not catch hold of them. Then I put my left hand on it, pressed it, and then I sank into it, slowly, its colors taking me in, I sank into its colors as though into the pond. It was warm and cool now, it was nothing at all, it was everything, it was O! Nothing nobody, not Mr. Gardner and not Ammi either, had ever taken me into this new world that the stone did, its colors.

It could not tell you, and I could not tell you, the stone.

So when people accused me and Ammi of doing it in the bed or in the kitchen or in the parlor, it was really that they accused me of doing it with the stone. And I did.

If they wanted to burn me or drown me they should have paid attention to that afternoon or to me that night when I lay on the stone, when I clasped it, when I ground it into my groin. It was the first time I ever, no not ever.

I'm sick, I know I'm sick.

Can I tell any of this to Mr. Gardner or to Ammi? No.

Can I tell it to the surveyor Mr. Lovecraft? He comes through the village and the farms. He is very attentive. He says that he wants to know what will happen to us when the reservoir covers our farms as the waters cover the sea. He has talked with Mr. Gardner about this, but Mr. Gardner will not listen.

And after so many questions he asks me. What will the flood do to my life as a wife and mother? I ask you. After so many questions I pushed him across the kitchen table and unbuckled his belt. Did he even unbuckle that belt as fast as I did? Or did I only dream it?

He was so clever, that surveyor, to pretend that he arrived in our valley years after all this had happened. If you will put the woman away in the attic, now, in this enlightened age, you need to put some distance between you and the act. Much distance.

The truth.

The truth is that the surveyor helped Mr. Gardner, hauling me kicking and screaming, bucking, as the two of them took me up to the attic. I never consented. By that time the congregation had passed judgment on me, an adulterous wife more times than they could count. With the stone more times than they could count—numbers don't count with the stone. But now they knew, or thought they knew. They shoved me into the attic, my husband and the surveyor. I stripped myself naked then, and my belly showered colors, more colors than they or I could have ever imagined. Before that it was just my talk that made them drag me to the attic, but then in a few days I began to flake.

Though he came by years later and never saw the stone himself, so he claimed, the surveyor Mr. Lovecraft was only too happy to accept the accounts of Ammi and of others that would have the stone be hot, "torrid" the surveyor wrote. I tell you, however—whoever you it may be, but Mr. Gardner will never pass my account along—it was warm and acceptant. Yes, it took me somewhere else and that was good. Not even Ammi could believe it when I told him. "You're just making that up," he said. "No woman can do it with a stone," he said, "no man either," he said, and he laughed.

I went into the stone and saw a shoggoth. People talk about shoggoths, late at night around the fire, but I don't think anyone has truly seen one.

How beautiful it was! Perhaps that's where the colors came from, the rainbow skin of the shoggoth as it transforms itself into new people and new landscapes in which they played. It's true, I think, at the end of the rainbow is a pot of gold, the shoggoth. It all depends on how you look at it.

Or it's me. When I first went to the one-room schoolhouse that lies five miles away from here, on the other side of my family's farm from Arkham, the teacher looked at me as though I were someone different. He didn't like

girls much, he didn't think we had any place in school, so I had to be different if I hung on. I learned to write the slanting, rounded letters we used then, and I had the most beautiful hand. Look at it now, you, as I scribble away at this story, racing to tell it before I flake off skin and brain and fingers too. After two years that teacher convinced my daddy to take me away from school. I was no use. That was the first time they put me in the attic.

They had some reason perhaps. When Daddy decided I should no longer go to school I screamed. He grabbed me by my shoulders and shook me and I screamed, I threw myself on the ground, thrashing and screaming. "You dirty little monster!" my daddy yelled. "You dirty little monster!" He hauled me up screaming and locked me in the attic. I screamed until it was as though I'd ripped my throat out and lay there wrung out. The pale light of the three small windows and the dust settled on me.

That night as it grew dark I called, "Let me out, let me out, please," but my daddy wouldn't listen. I curled up so I wouldn't see the darkness, but the darkness peaked through my eyelids and I fell asleep crying. He kept me there two more days. My mother said nothing, but I didn't expect her to say anything because she never did. He'd beaten it out of her. I had to clean and wash the attic before he let me out, and for days he called me his dirty little monster. I kissed him.

I know women whose daddies put them in the cellar, but the attic is worse. In the cellar, deep in the ground, you have protection, the company of the dead, but in the attic you have no protection, and if anyone else is with you they're not human. It's the dust, the pale light, and the stars.

Mr. Lovecraft the surveyor had a different idea on all this when he tried out his skill once more a few years later in a story that with some misdirection he called "The Thing on the Doorstep," placing a woman, a dead woman, in the cellar. But she had an immense power nevertheless to call out the man who had placed her there and place him there in her stead. No one in the attic has such power, not me at all. I tried. But what was the power she exerted? It was not hers but her daddy's, it was never hers at all. Yes, her daddy's. What shall we say? Whether in the cellar or in

the attic, the husbands and daddies and brothers have all the power in the world to lock their women there, off in the dirty place, and go about their business with a clean conscience. Mincing, pious brutes.

How do I know these things, you would ask, you, if you stood in front of me, listening? I know these things because, well, I know them. I was reading that story of the dead woman in the cellar because I read it over your shoulder.

It is all right now in the attic, now that I have gone into the stone and met the shoggoth, and the shoggoth, shimmering in the shadow of its colors, taught me all things.

You, are you still reading this? As long as you read it I'm alive. If you don't read it I am worse than dead, I have never existed. Pay attention. Please. Wake up. But you're a man, aren't you, with the power of the words and reading the words, so you just never wake up.

When Mr. Gardner put me in the attic we had none of that drama between me and my daddy. No, he said to me very quietly, the day after the hired hand saw me, "Mrs. Gardner, I think it's best for us all if you will spend some time in that attic." He didn't say I would be in the attic until I died, that I was dead beyond redemption when I walked up the stairs, went inside, and he locked the door. But I had already died when I became Mrs. Gardner and left my old name, that my daddy gave me, behind. Or was that it, that I died when Daddy gave me the name? [The hand is illegible here, the scribble partially erased.] I have always been already dead. That's what happens to the women in the attics, here in these towns.

I know. I've already said they had to haul me into the attic kicking and screaming. Well, that was one way to tell the story, wasn't it? What do you think I did?

The surveyor Mr. Lovecraft, some years after these events, gave Mr. Gardner a name to call me, Nabby, in order to increase the pathos of the story, but there is no pathos to this story. Nabby is a nickname for Abigail, "the joy of the father" according to our Bible—how dare anyone, anyone believe that I had much joy in my father? I grant you, in the story that's recounted in First Samuel, Abigail is a very clever harridan who leaves her

husband in his wine and death and becomes a wife of David—not a bad accomplishment in those days. Perhaps Mr. Lovecraft wrote better than he knew. Granting all that, I have no name, none of my own, none that is truly mine, and so I was only half alive or more than half dead. I am waiting for my name.

“Hey nonny nonny, hey a-down, down,” sings Ophelia with a dead daddy on her hands. Aren’t we too mad! Aren’t we too mournful! I’ll be dead soon. There goes a finger! Thank goodness it’s from the left hand and I can still write. But not much longer.

I don’t want to be in the dumps, not the way I was before Ammi suggested we do it in the parlor where the rug was soft. I laughed. I hated that rug. It was soft because it had come down through generations of Mr. Gardners. Once a month a Mrs. Gardner would beat it on the line with the wash, beat it until her rage was satisfied and her arm was stiff, and I beat it too, waiting for what I had no idea. Not until the stone fell out of heaven and taught me its beatitudes, its blessings.

Lest you misunderstand me, let me be clear. I do not speak in irony, as so often the woman in the attic does. The stone was a blessing because no one could understand it, not the three wise men from Arkham and not my Mr. Gardner, not even Ammi. No one could understand it but me, a dirty little monster, and I wouldn’t tell them. I sank into the stone, met the shoggoth, and it gave me the key to time.

To return, I say with great emphasis, to the matter at hand, the stone. I suffer for it no doubt, but so does the entire farm, Mr. Gardner, our three sons, the cows and the flowers and the weeds. The boys die in a few months, and despite what the surveyor says Mr. Gardner dies in thirty-nine years. Here I scream—I don’t scream very well because my tongue and lips have rotted. The stone employs us for its own ends. And I know what those ends are. The stone waited for someone courageous enough to sink into it and meet the shoggoth, and then—yes, and then?

I am elsewhere.

The power of the shoggoth, as the surveyor has revealed, is to transform itself, to become something else thoroughly, never to give away that it is

what it is, a shoggoth, but to be in every way the creature it has encountered. And so I who am writing this, flaking away skin and brain, crumbling into nothing, I am that which of course I can never confess. But what is more marginal than this body, this dirty little monster that when the proper time comes Mr. Gardner will shovel into a hole and then the story ends. You come to the last period and let me drop off the page.

Thank you.

Far from Any Shore

CAITLÍN R. KIERNAN

Caitlín R. Kiernan is a two-time recipient of both the World Fantasy and Bram Stoker Awards, and the New York Times has declared her “one of our essential writers of dark fiction.” Her recent novels include The Red Tree and The Drowning Girl: A Memoir, and, to date, her short stories have been collected in twelve volumes, including Tales of Pain and Wonder, A Is for Alien, The Ammonite Violin & Others, the World Fantasy Award–winning The Ape’s Wife and Other Stories, and Beneath an Oil-Dark Sea: The Best of Caitlín R. Kiernan (Volume 2). Currently she is editing Houses Under the Sea: Mythos Tales for Centipede Press. She will soon begin work on her next novel, Interstate Love Song, based on “Interstate Love Song (Murder Ballad #8).” She lives in Providence, Rhode Island.



IT FITS EASILY INTO THE PALM OF MY HAND, NO larger than a baseball or a small red apple. It isn't quite so round as either of those things, the "Venus of Gove County," which Jackson took to calling the artifact the day after it was unearthed from the chalky badlands just south of Castle Rock. Every time I lift it from the cardboard box, from that simple excelsior-lined cradle, I'm surprised at its light weight. Though carved of something that looks very much like a greenish-grey soapstone, the object weighs hardly anything at all. It might well have been fashioned not from any stone, but of balsa wood. I hold it, and I close my fingers tightly about it. I feel, or I only imagine I feel, an icy thrumming tingle that resonates through the flesh and bones of my hand and then moves gradually up my arm. If I hold it long enough, I can hear the ocean, and this seems to me precisely the same auditory illusion I've imagined when holding a conch shell up to my ear. Seashell resonance, it's called, and you can get just exactly the same effect simply by placing an empty glass to your ear, or nothing more than your cupped hand. But where's the romance in that? I can never bring myself to handle the thing for very long, Jackson's Venus, and so I either set it down on the table in front of the motel window or I return it to its box. This time, the former. I pour another shot of Jack into the plastic cup I've been drinking from, on and off, since I checked into the room, shortly before dawn. I know that I'm drunk. I have a second bottle of whisky, still unopened, and I intend to keep drinking until both bottles are empty. The alcohol isn't helping, but I don't know what else to do. I've set it on the table, and in the sliver of sunlight getting in through the narrow slit where the closed drapes do not quite meet, the thing seems oily. It isn't the least bit oily to the touch, but there it sits

shimmering, regardless, showing off all the motely hues of motor oil spilled into a puddle of water. I shut my eyes, because I can only ever watch it for just so long.

"It isn't what it looks like," Joanna Fielding said, rolling it about in her callused hands. We three sat together by Coleman lamplight, the night after Jackson brought it into camp. "Whatever it is," she said, "it sure isn't that."

"When I was a kid," said Jackson, "when I was in seventh grade, I found a rock shaped like a penis. Not just the penis, mind you, but the balls, too. I found it in a chert pit not far from my house. Now, it wasn't anything but a siltstone concretion, but—"

"A pseudofossil," Joanna said, interrupting him.

"Well, of course. Right. A pseudofossil. But it sure as hell *looked* like a dick, you know? Next day, I took it to school with me, and a teacher fucking confiscated it. At the end of the day, when I asked for it back, he said no, and he also told me he'd call my parents if I brought the matter up again. He accused me of having carved it."

"Yeah, well, whatever it is," Joanna said again, "it isn't what it looks like."

A warm, grass-scented wind blew across the Kansas prairie, blowing out of the summer night and rattling the tarp above our heads, rustling the tents. Jackson shook his head and laughed.

"Probably, it's a coprolite," he said. "That's what makes the most sense. We get it back to the lab and run a couple of tests, it's going to turn out we've got nothing here but a lump of calcium phosphate. Seventy-three million years ago, a mosasaur or a plesiosaur, or just a shark, came along and took a big ol' dump, and here we are gawking at fossilized shit, like it's the image of Jesus Christ or Elvis Presley on a grilled-cheese sandwich."

In my motel room, behind closed eyelids, the three of us laugh at that, and Joanna passes the ugly thing back to Jackson. He makes a joke about the Cardiff Giant, and what if some hayseed hick farmer had found this during, say, the Great Depression? Why, just imagine driving merrily along in Granddad's rattletrap Model T, and here's a hand-painted plywood sign

stuck up at the side of the road: Venus of Gove County! Carved by Adam in the Garden of Eden! See it now! Just 5¢ a head! And we laughed, as we'd laughed at the grilled-cheese joke. We laughed because we're scientists, and our enlightened, educated minds don't project superstitious nonsense onto oddly shaped rocks. We don't fall for the trickery of pareidolia. Rationality wins out every time over optical illusions and misleading pattern recognition; I know there's no ocean inside a conch shell. The wind snatched at our laughter and dragged it off into the night to haunt the ears of mule deer, jackrabbits, and pronghorn antelope.

Here in the motel there's a noise, and I open my eyes and squint through the daylight shadows towards the bathroom. The door's shut, and I try to recall whether it was shut when I came in, or if I closed it. And I wonder why I didn't turn on any of the lights before I drew the drapes closed. I sit very still, listening, but I don't hear anything else, and after five minutes or so I reach for the remote and switch on the little flat-screen Toshiba TV facing the bed. It flickers obediently to life, tuned to a reality show about wealthy rednecks in the Louisiana bayous. I sit and stare at it for more than half an hour, because that's better than sitting and staring at the thing from the cardboard box, the thing Charlie Jackson dug out of the chalk more than two days ago now. My heart's racing, my mouth is cottony, and my palms are sweating, even though the AC's cranked all the way up to the highest setting.

"I saw something like this once," said Joanna Fielding.

It was almost midnight when I took the pickup and left camp, following roads that were hardly more than rutted, washed-out cattle trails winding between the Niobrara canyons and cornfields, following the only path out of that desolate landscape, bumping and swerving back to narrow county highways and, eventually, northwards to I-70. The cardboard box rode in the passenger seat next to me, hidden from view beneath a wool blanket. At Grainfield, I should have turned west, back towards Boulder, back towards the mountains. Instead, I stopped at the Sinclair station (one of the few I've ever seen that still have the once-iconic green dinosaur on its sign) and topped off the tank. Moving on autopilot, force of habit, I crossed

the street to a diner and ordered breakfast, eggs and bacon and grits, but didn't eat any of it. I drank two cups of bitter coffee. The waitress watched me the whole time, as if she expected me to rob the place. There were seven black stars tattooed on the back of her left hand. I paid the bill, bought a pack of Camel's from a vending machine, and I then I took the Interstate east—I think I never will know why—and I kept right on driving until I was across the state line and into Missouri.

Once, a state trooper appeared in my rearview mirror, as if from nowhere, as if some phantom spat out by the night, but I minded my p's and q's, kept my eyes on the truck's speedometer, and after a few miles he (or she) passed me.

"I was in San Francisco," Joanna said, "back in the mid-nineties, and I saw something like it. Not *exactly* like it, but what I saw in Berkeley, that's what first crossed my mind when Charlie brought it into the camp yesterday."

"What was it?" I asked her. "What was it you saw in Berkeley?"

Lying on the stiff Motel 6 mattress, I'm pretending I can get some sleep. The television is talking to itself, doing a shit job of keeping me company, a shit job of drowning out my restless thoughts. The room smells like air freshener, antiseptic spray, Ivory soap, clean linen, and, very faintly, of cigarette smoke, despite the No Smoking signs and the smoke alarms. Out in the sun-drenched parking lot, I can hear cars coming and going. I hear a maid roll her cart past my door. And then I hear that noise from the bathroom again, and then a third time after that. But I don't get up to see what, if anything, is making it. I lie still, and my heart is beating louder than the crawling voices of the idiot swamp people on the television, basking in their unlikely, fleeting, grotesque fame.

"It was on display at the Hearst Museum," said Joanna Fielding, avoiding my question. "I have a friend there, an ex, and I was in town for a few days, and she and I met for lunch. We're still good friends. We've stayed on good terms. She had a curatorial position there."

Joanna was rambling, but I didn't hurry her.

“It was in a tall case all by itself, next to a display of Tlingit and Haida religious artifacts. The label said it had come from marine dredgings off the coast of Prince of Wales Island. It was almost the exact same size and shape as what Charlie found.”

My exhausted thoughts are jumbled up and melting with the yammering voices on TV. And I hear Jackson say, *I just need some sleep, man. Just a few hours, and then my head will be clearer, and I can figure out what to do. What happens next.* I hear him say those words, but I’m pretty sure the sentiment is mine.

“So,” I asked Joanna again, “what was it, the artifact from Alaska?”

She frowned and shook her head.

“They were calling it a fetish, something shamanistic, maybe a spirit totem. It was black. *Deep jet black*, supposedly carved from argillite.” And then she laughed a nervous laugh and lit a cigarette. She blew smoke rings towards the Coleman lantern and a huge moth swooping crazily about the flaring propane light.

“It turned up in 1937, during a canal expansion for a ferry, pulled in with all the sand and clay and everything else by the trailing suction hopper.”

“All that was in the exhibit text?”

Joanna shrugged and tapped ash into the grass at her feet. To the south of camp, there was thunder and a flash of heat lightning.

“You ask me,” she said, “Charlie should just put it right back where he found it and cover it over, bury it.”

I open my eyes and roll over, rolling towards the window, away from the bathroom. The digital alarm clock says it’s 3:46 P.M., and I wonder where the hell all those hours have gone. Have I been dozing, dreaming of Joanna Fielding telling me her story about the Haida artifact? My eyes come to rest on the thing from the chalk, sitting where I left it on the table. Somehow, I’m surprised that it’s still there. Probably I was wishing, without knowing I was wishing, that it would be gone. I could get up and get dressed, couldn’t I? Get in the truck and start driving again, and I could spend my life forgetting it and forgetting what I’ve done because of it.

No, I can't. *Why even bother thinking a thing like that, when I fucking well fucking know better?*

I'm thirsty. Suddenly, I'm so awfully thirsty. I sit up and rub at my face, and then I stare at the clock, and then I stare at the table.

"It was about a hundred feet downslope from the excavation," Jackson said, when he'd come into camp with the thing, when I'd asked him exactly where he'd found it. "I marked the spot. It was already mostly weathered free. At first, I thought it was nothing but a badly eroded mosasaur vertebra. Just junk. In fact, I was pretty *sure* that's what it was, until I started digging and got it out of the ground."

"You should have left it alone," Joanna said. "You should have left it out there." Except, no, she said *that* later. The next day, I think. "You should have left the fucking thing where you found it."

Charlie was eating saltine crackers with a can of sardines packed in Tabasco sauce, and he looked up from his lunch.

"You're telling me you'd have left it?" he asked her. "Seriously? You expect me to believe that?"

She didn't reply.

I can hear two people arguing out in the parking lot, a man and a woman; they're speaking Spanish. Never mind the smoke alarm and the motel's rules, I want a cigarette. But when I check the pocket of the shirt I was wearing last night, all I find is a crumpled pack and some brown scraps of tobacco hiding inside. My mouth tastes like ass, and I consider taking a shower. But then I'd have to open that door I can't remember whether I shut or not. And if I *did* shut it, I might have had a damn good reason.

"*No me preguntes porqué,*" says one of the Spanish speakers, the woman.

"*Era el océano. He visto el mar,*" the man replies.

I root about in my knapsack and find a clean T-shirt and jeans, a cleanish pair of underwear, and a Tiger's Milk bar that'll have to pass for lunch. Or dinner. I sit cross-legged at the foot of the bed, barefoot, my reflection in the bureau mirror staring back at me while I eat. I look like hammered shit, as my grandfather would have said. As my dad would have said. I use my fingers to comb at my hair, as if it matters. The woman in the

mirror could easily be fifty, instead of thirty-five. That look in her eyes, I've seen it in photographs of veterans from Afghanistan and Iraq.

"*Porqué habla demasiado algunas personas,*" says the woman in the parking lot.

"*Yo no sé. Nunca habló conmigo,*" the man replies.

The rumpled woman in the mirror crumbles the Tiger's Milk wrapper and tosses it at the wastebasket. And misses. I reach into the knapsack again and pull out my iPad. I try hard to focus, to shut out the voices from the other side of the motel door *and* my memories of everything that happened in camp *and* the siren-song lure of Jackson's Venus, still sitting on the table, but I might as well be trying to put toothpaste back into the tube.

Why haven't I stuck the fucking thing back in the cardboard box?

I hear that noise from the bathroom again and close my eyes. The noise seems more urgent, more persistent than before, as if it's getting fed up with me ignoring it. But fuck it. Fuck the bullshit echoes in my head. I close my eyes, and there we are, on the bright day after Charlie found his Venus, his Madonna of the Late Cretaceous epicontinental seas, the three of us walking through the tall grass back to the ten-foot-by-ten-foot hole we've dug in the chalk. We've exposed the skull and forelimbs and most of the vertebral column of an exquisitely preserved little mosasaur, only the second known specimen of *Selmasaurus kiernanae*. With luck, the back flippers are in there somewhere, and we just haven't found them yet. Coupled with the *Pteranodon* skull we found the week before, it'll have been a very profitable trip. I watch where I put my feet, keeping an eye out for prairie rattlers. Behind me and to my right, Charlie Jackson is chattering as if it's any other day in the field, telling a dirty joke about prairie dogs. There seems to be no end to his reserve of prairie dog jokes. Joanna is walking a little ways in front of us, apart from us; she hasn't said a word since we left camp. There's a Marsh pick in her left hand, swinging like a pendulum. Me, I want to talk about the dream I had the night before. But I know that's the very last thing I'll ever do.

The afternoon air smells like rain and ozone, though there's not a cloud visible anywhere in the wide, wide west Kansas sky.

The day is long and hot, and we move a few hundred pounds of overburden, but we don't find the hindlimbs of the mosasaur, just a few oyster shells and fish bones. We work mostly in silence, and several times I catch Joanna Fielding staring off towards the spot where Charlie found the thing that's now sitting on the table in my motel room. She looks lost and afraid.

I open my eyes.

*"A continuación, gire no pálido, caracol amada,
Pero venir y unirse a la danza."*

I almost go to the window and push the drapes aside to get a look at the man and woman in the parking lot. I consider opening the door and asking her why she's begun quoting Lewis Carroll. Why in creation would she be doing that in a motel parking lot, during the heat of the day? I don't go to the window, and I don't open the door; I only *almost* do.

That last day, I only *almost* asked Joanna Fielding what she was thinking, gazing out across the gullies. Her eyes were near to the same shade as the blue-white sky, and, I thought, just as desolate. The woman watching me from the mirror has eyes like that, even though her eyes are green.

I do a Google search and turn up an article in the archives of the *Wrangell Sentinel*, dated June 17, 1937, a brief account of the foundering of the dredger *Sweet Leilani* at the mouth of Cross Sound off Chichagof Island. One week earlier, it had been working some two hundred and fifty miles southeast, off Prince of Wales Island, clearing a channel for a ferry. The ship went down with all hands onboard, no survivors. The weather was good, and the ship sent no distress signal. Very little wreckage was recovered.

The label said it had come from marine dredgings off the coast of Prince of Wales Island. It turned up in 1937, during a canal expansion for a ferry. That's

what Joanna told us, and all I have to do is add two and fucking two.

In the same paper, one week and a day later, there's the captain's obituary. *Captain Sternberg was an avid collector of aboriginal artifacts, and his widow will be donating his collection to the Lowie Museum in Berkeley, Calif.* I check Wikipedia and see that in 1991 the Lowie Museum of Anthropology was rechristened the Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology.

*"Hay otra orilla, ya sabes,
Tras el otro lado."*

"Shut up," I whisper. "Please just shut the hell up. I don't need to hear —"

Outside, the man and woman laugh, one laugh high and shrill, the other low and rumbling like distant thunder, a laugh pregnant with threat. The insistent noises coming from the bathroom, almost constant now, are nothing at all like laughter. They're the same noises I heard the night that Joanna Fielding died, sounds that are wet and hollow and, if sound can be said to be cold, very, very cold. Sound from below the weight of a salty mountain of water.

"She's sick," Charlie Jackson says. Charlie Jackson *said*. Sitting here, time is coming apart all around me, raveling. No, that's not quite right. Time has been coming apart around me for days, but I'm only now becoming acutely aware of my, what—temporal dissociation? Temporal dysphoria? There's no precedent, I don't think, and so there's no proper diagnosis. But I suspect, maybe, the crew of the *Sweet Leilani* might have felt something like this, in the hours before the ship sank in the frigid depths of Cross Sound. I have to assume that Joanna and Charlie felt it, too. I wonder about the employees at the Hearst Museum, and if visitors who've peered into the case containing the Prince of Wales Island artifact have felt it.

"*Madre Hydra,*" says the woman in the parking lot. "*Limosna para Madre Hydra. Limosna para el abismo.*"

Alms for Mother Hydra.

Alms for the abyss.

“There was a photograph,” says (said) Joanna Fielding, “displayed there with the thing the dredger found. A very similar fetish—if that’s what those things were—from a dig in Tell Mardikh, in Syria. It was dated to 2700 B.C. The two pieces, I swear they could have been carved by the same hand, they were that similar.”

“And what I found, you’re saying it looks like—” Charlie began (begins).

“Only almost,” says (said) Joanna, interrupting him, emphatic. “Only almost.”

“It’s just a goddamn coprolite,” Charlie told (tells) her. “You’ll see.”

I need to piss, but that means opening the bathroom door. I consider pissing in the wastebasket. Really, what possible goddamn difference does it make? I’m a murderer now, and pissing in the wastebasket of a Motel 6 in Columbia, Missouri, must certainly constitute an inconsequential transgression. It’s even lined with a plastic bag. I promise my aim will be better than when I tossed the Tiger’s Milk wrapper.

“She needs a hospital,” Charlie says. “Right? We need to get her to a hospital.” That was about five hours before he was also bedridden, too weak to leave his tent.

“It’s not a disease,” he says. “I don’t think it’s a disease, and I don’t think it’s a spider bite or anything like that.”

I relieve myself in the wastebasket. I wipe with a handful of napkins I found beside the coffeemaker.

“I had the dream again,” says Charlie Jackson.

“Yeah, well, keep it to yourself, please,” I reply. I’m trying to make the day’s entry in the field logbook. I’ve written nothing about what Charlie found, and I won’t.

“She’s sick,” he says. “Her eyes, Jesus, her eyes are all wrong.”

That was the night I stopped him from smashing the artifact with a crack hammer. I still can’t say why I didn’t let him do it.

After I piss, after I’ve pulled my jeans up and fastened them and poured myself another plastic cupful of bourbon, I go to the table by the window. I

sit and pick up the object, the artifact, the thing, *it*. At once, there's the thrumming sensation pulsing up my arm and the sound of the sea in my ears. The thing from the chalk bears a passing resemblance to the famous Venus of Willendorf, but much rounder, less pear-shaped. The breasts, if those are meant to be breasts, are gigantic, and I imagine I can make out the pubic area, *le mont de Vénus*. The faceless head is absurdly small, and ringed about with what might be plaited rows of hair, but which put me much more in mind of the suckered arms of an octopus or squid. And arranged around the ludicrously swollen belly are a dozen or so dimples that, to me, look all the world like bulging eyes. This afternoon, afternoon now become almost evening, it seems heavier in my hand than ever it has before.

On the other side of the door, on that sunbaked plain of asphalt and automobiles, the woman all but chants:

*Sin usted, ¿no es cierto, ¿verdad,
¿No le gustaría, ¿no unirse a la danza?
Sin usted, ¿no es cierto, ¿verdad,
¿No le gustaría, ¿no unirse a la danza?*

And this time, I'm the one who laughs.
Will you, won't you...?

I set the thing back down on the table, then glance towards my pack. My gun's in there, the .22 Colt my father left me. It would be so easy to put an end to this, or, more precisely, to remove myself from the unfolding equation. I've begun to believe something has been set in motion here that will long survive me, just as it has survived Charlie and Joanna. A man dug a lump of stone out of the earth. A butterfly flapped its wings. And now there is a whirlwind, long forestalled, to be reaped. The thought of squeezing that trigger almost brings me solace, but I haven't the courage, and I can't allow myself to pretend that I'll find it. I look back at the carving—I will say that, *carving*, because I also will not allow myself to

pretend that it's a coprolite or a concretion or any other chance geologic phenomenon. It is precisely what it appears to be. It is a carving, sculpted by a sentient being, more than seventy million years before the evolution of man. Whatever is to come, I won't hide in brittle denial.

"Maybe something was sprayed on the fields," says Charlie. "A pesticide that we're having a reaction to, I don't know. Something poisonous, maybe even hallucinogenic. Something we've been breathing for days that's gotten into our water and our food, messing about with our heads." And he talks (talked) about crop dusting, spray drift, volatilization drift, chlorinated hydrocarbon pesticides dissolving in and being stored in fatty tissue, DDT, damage to the nervous system by organophosphate insecticides. "Did you know," said Charlie, "that upwards of ninety-five percent of all applied pesticides actually fucking miss their intended target, and instead end up falling on people, wildlife, lakes and rivers, the soil? Dow and Monsanto try to cover all that shit up, but people know. It's all over the Internet. And Jesus, don't get me started in on what it's doing to the bees."

"You're beginning to sound like some nut from that Art Bell radio show," I told (tell) him.

"Fuck you," he said.

The phone in my room starts ringing; I'm not about to answer it. Who would possibly be calling me? No one knows I'm here. The phone rings twenty times, and then there's five minutes or so of silence before my cell phone begins to buzz. I let it.

"You're dreaming, too," said Charlie, lying there in his sleeping bag, dying fast and delirious. "You won't tell the truth, but I know you're dreaming the same dream as me and Jo. I've seen you down there, walking the ruins, wandering hallways in the mansions of Poseidon."

"Shhhh. Be quiet. Don't talk."

He was running a fever of 105°F. He'd shat himself, and there was red blood and mucus in his stool.

"You need to rest," I said, and then I managed to get a few swallows of Gatorade in him, but he threw it all right back up again.

“It doesn’t make you sane,” he said. “It doesn’t make you brave, or better than us, lying like you’re doing.”

And then he told me to get rid of the artifact, to take it back where he’d found it, to do what Joanna had asked him to do two days earlier.

Two days, or three. I’m no longer sure how long it has been.

Finally, I left him in his tent and sat watching a storm pass by ten or twenty miles south of the camp, towering thunderheads, anvils of water vapor and flickering electric fingers. Their undersides were black as the boils on Charlie and Joanna’s bodies. I could taste the rain, but I knew it would come nowhere near us. I thought, *We’ve been quarantined by all that is clean and natural. We’re being shunned.* There were no calls of nocturnal birds that night, no lonely coyote songs; I didn’t even hear crickets and katydids. *We’ve been set apart, and the prairie and the sky are holding their breath.*

*“¡Se puede realmente no tienen idea de
Qué maravilla será
Cuando nos llevan y nos tiran,
Con las langostas, en el mar!”*

“It was my *favorite* book when I was a little girl,” says (said) Joanna, burning alive in her own fever. “I memorized passages and would recite them to my parents and my brother, who were almost always patient and would listen. I memorized all of ‘Jabberwocky,’ ‘The Lobster Quadrille,’ and ‘The Walrus and the Carpenter.’ I learned them in English, French, Latin, and Spanish.” And she recited:

*“The sea was wet as wet could be,
The sands were dry as dry.
You could not see a cloud, because...”*

Joanna stops (stopped, has not yet begun to speak), midverse, and she said to me, raving, “She loves *you* most of all. Lucky girl, lucky, lucky girl. I am all green with envy. You’ll live to see the rising of the waters, the ninth

wave, gathering half the deep, roaring, and all the waves will be in a flame. You'll see the clock turned back, deep timewards, lucky, lucky girl. *Tiefer, tiefer. Irgendwo in der tiefer.* You'll see Laramidia and Appalachia restored to bracket serpent-haunted tides, the night of first ages restored, monstrous and free, and Mother Hydra will take your hand and lead you through the welcoming, unlit fathoms."

I wanted to slap her. I wanted to hold my hand over her mouth and force the lunatic's words back down her throat. But, instead, imagining it mercy, I let her rant until she passed out again. Then I sat with the sleeper. The boils on her forehead and cheeks had at first looked like inguinal buboes and had made me fear it was bubonic plague, her blood—and Charlie's, too—swarming with a devouring bacterial lode, *Yersinia pestis* taking them apart. And so it might not have been the thing from the chalk at all, but only flea bites. I had no idea why or how I'd been spared, only *lucky, lucky girl.*

The tent reeked of vomit and shit, saltwater and dead fish.

"She'll tear a hole in the sky," Joanna said, an hour later. "You'll see," and then a boil on her left hand had burst, skin splitting like overripe fruit, and an eye as black as the bottommost bottom of the sea had opened and turned its gaze towards me.

Beyond the door to my hotel room, as a bloated, bloody Missouri sun falls down towards the simmering horizon, I hear dancing feet, happy dancers cavorting on the pavement to greet the coming night. The man and woman were no longer alone out there.

*Sin usted, ¿no es cierto, ¿verdad,
¿No le gustaría, ¿no unirse a la danza?*

Beyond the closed door to the bathroom, something rolls ponderously about and splashes and sings in the ancient voices of whales. Something unnamable has been born, and I'm afraid I was, unconsciously, its midwife. It fed from Joanna Fielding's dreams and fever, and it fed from Charlie Jackson, and I carried it, fetal, along a darkened Interstate, spiriting it away

from its cradle, its prison, and out into a not entirely unsuspecting world. I know now there are those who have been waiting for... this will sound like a line from a shitty horror film... waiting for a sign. They're out there in the dusk, calling me to dance the world's end tarantella.

I put the barrel of the .22 to what was left of Joanna's face, and she smiled, showing me a mouthful of crystalline barracuda teeth. I squeezed the trigger once, twice, three times, the shot echoing across the stillness of the prairie. And then I did the same with Jackson. I cannot even know if I were merciful. I acted out of horror as much as anything, seeing human beings reduced, or merely so altered. I could not have left them there, unable to die despite my earlier certainties that their deaths were imminent. So I squeezed the trigger, again and again, and I left them lying, where I shot them, and I called it murder. I hadn't the energy or the presence of mind to bury the corpses, though, in retrospect, I can hardly bear the thought that coyotes and buzzards and maggots are feeding on that corrupted flesh, spreading the contagion. I know in my heart and my guts and in the recesses of my lizard hindbrain that it is a contagion—organic, mnemonic, visual, tactile, older even than the strata of blue-grey shale and yellow chalky limestone that preserved its ceramic Venus of Gove County vector, something infinitely communicable that has slept since the stone that entombed the beautiful petrified skeletons of our *Selmasaurus* and *Pteranodon* was only carbonaceous silt and clayey slime.

Outside, the ring of lights around the parking lot have awakened, bathing an unseen bacchanal in soulless white sodium-halide glare. The sun has gone down in the west, and the moon's hungry eye has come to keep watch.

*Extraña es la noche en la que se alzan las estrellas negras.
Y extrañas son las lunas que giran en los cielos.
Pero más extraña todavía es la
Perdida Carcosa.*

What, I wonder, is happening at the Hearst Museum?

And wherever that artifact from Syria has been kept all these years, are there also dancers gathering there?

Not seven requisite seals for an apocalypse, but only three for *this* Second Coming. Though, of course, there may well have been another four somewhere, or even another hundred, discovered down millennia and never brought to the attention of scholars and priests, science or newspapers. I screw the cap off the Jack Daniel's bottle and refill my cup with the last of the bourbon; when I swallow, it's a comforting fire in my chest. I drink and consider making a run to the liquor store just down the street, but I have a feeling the revelers would never let me pass. I am, after all, their fatted calf, their sacrificial goat, caged here and awaiting the appointed moment when angel trumpets sound, and the lamb with seven horns and seven eyes is called from her motel room and released to open the book, *her* book. I have brought them the final piece in a puzzle. The whirlwind in the thorn tree. Alpha and Omega. Four white horses breaking at the crest of a tsunami reaching out to the spaces between galaxies.

Ah, God, how I wanted to make sense here at the end. How I wanted linear narrative and compositional coherence, here at the end. The end which I understand is truly only the *beginning of the beginning*, and I began these pages with my mind so much more intact, didn't I? But the recollections of camp, the sounds leaking from behind the two closed doors that flank me, the dreams and alcohol, the thing squatting on the table, all have conspired to undo the stingy scraps that remained of my sanity.

*Pero no quiso unirse a la danza.
Por lo tanto, no lo haría, no podría, no lo haría,
No podría, no unirse a la danza.
¿No, no podría, no lo haría,
No podría, no podría participar en el baile.*

The television has gone to static. White noise. Not even a test pattern. I only almost switch it off.

Someone knocks on the door to my room, rapping impatient knuckles, and they whisper promises that I have nothing to fear from them, nothing whatsoever. That never again will I need to be afraid. *Please come out and play. Please come out and dance.* But he or she—I cannot tell which, and it certainly doesn't matter—didn't sit vigil while Joanna and Charlie were gnawed and twisted and refashioned. They didn't see the lightning tongues licking at the tall waving grass, or feel the Kansas prairie recoiling from their footsteps. They didn't wait alone by the glow of a Coleman lantern, wrapped in the arms of the quietest, stillest night.

Before it's over, I want to get this down:

The day before Jackson found his demon, we worked happily, so carefully brushing and digging away sediment from permineralized bone, whisk brooms and trowels, dental picks and hawkbill knives, and Joanna smiled and gazed up at the blistering summer sun. It painted her brown cheeks and chestnut hair and caught in the facets of her sky-blue eyes. And she said, "We're lucky, you know? We're the luckiest people on earth, kneeling here at the bottom of the sea. When I think about it, *really* think about it, that where I am in this moment once a hundred, two hundred meters of inland sea was stacked up overhead, pressing down."

Jackson called her a hopeless romantic.

"It's my church," she replied.

There.

On the table, the carving has begun to ooze what looks like transmission fluid and smells like puke.

A crowd has gathered out there, singing, cavorting, waltzing, fucking, bleeding, calling down that hungry moon, and now the soft body of something without a spine or even any definite form—I know this for I saw it in the dreams I refused to share with Charlie Jackson—is slamming itself against the bathroom door. Because I might be a reluctant messiah, but it's on beyond eager to break free and join the dance.

Will you, won't you, will you,

Won't you, won't you join the dance?

*Will you, won't you, will you,
Won't you, won't you join the dance?*

I finish my drink and drop the cup to the scabby beige carpet, and then
I go to the open the bathroom door.

(My thanks to Yolanda Espiñeira Martínez.)

In Blackness Etched, My Name

W. H. PUGMIRE

Wilum Hopfrog Pugmire writes fiction so as to be identified with his literary hero, H. P. Lovecraft. He is the creator of Sesqua Valley, and for the past few years has delighted in setting his tales in the mythical towns invented by E'ch-Pi-El. His most recent books are In the Gulfs of Dream and Other Lovecraftian Tales (Dark Renaissance Books, 2015), co-authored with David Barker, and Monstrous Aftermath (Hippocampus Press, 2015). He has written (with David Barker) a collaborative novel set in Lovecraft's dreamland, Witches in Dreamland, and has written new stories for his second book from Centipede Press. He dreams in Seattle.



HAD SCRUTINIZED THE DIRECTIONS OF MY GREAT-uncle's crude map, and I had memorized his words of recollection as he whispered of the hills behind ancient Arkham, and of the region that had been settled by maternal ancestors in the late 1600s. The road I followed was old and grass-grown, and as my car drove over it I had the oddest feeling that I was journeying out of modern time, into a realm of mystery and wonder. I imagined that this particular region had altered little since the time of Randolph Carter's disappearance in October of 1928, and finding myself in the area now felt like a fantasy of dream, as if the hills contained secrets of dark magick that awaited my mortal presence. The Carter legend, whispered by my family, had long intrigued me, and I had used my heritage as an Aspinwall to secure certain papers and books that had belonged to my forebears.

It was while I attended a private university in Boston that I became obsessed with the history of Randolph Carter and his association with the baffling mystic, Harley Warren. I sought and found an ancient soul who had, as a youth, associated with Warren, and from him I gathered occult gleanings acquired by Warren's infernal clique. Discovering covens in Salem and Kingsport, I came to realize that I had a natural affinity for what I came to understand as Outside Things, as though my ancestral blood were pulled to arcane matters. Not being social, I came to practice the dark arts alone, and that was when my sorcery thrived. Contacting a great-uncle who was rumored to have trafficked with outré things, I began to practice magick with him and to discuss our family history. His attempts to dissuade me from dwelling on the legend of Randolph Carter had the opposite effect, for I could see in his filmy eyes that I had aroused his curiosity as

well, one that had been dormant for decades. Against his better judgment he showed me, one evening, the hand-drawn map that indicated the way to the old Carter property in the hills behind Arkham. That evening, he revealed to me a potent ritual; yet the excitement that his recitation evoked proved too heavy for his frail heart, and he expired. However, he had revealed all that I needed to know.

Thus, on the seventh of October, I navigated my old car up Elm Mountain and drove along the climbing road until coming to a pile of ruin that had once been a cottage. From a notation on my great-uncle's map, I knew that this had once been the dwelling place of a solitary soul who had won, through malevolence and witchery, an outrageous reputation. I spoke the woman's name in a whisper—"Goody Fowler"—but could not evoke her image in my mind. Parking my vehicle, I got out and stalked nonchalantly to the pile of rubble. A scented breeze brushed my face, and I gazed at a distant group of giant elms, the bright green leaves of which rustled in the growing wind. Something in their movement, and in the queer sparkling light all around, proved alluring, and I thought that it might be pleasant to skip toward those elms and dance among their assembly. Then the wind, rushing through the ruins, carried the smell of strange spices that I knew, from my traffic with witchery, to be the debris of magick that had been spilled in the destruction of the cottage. I knelt before the rubble and communed with extinct time as I touched my hand to rotten wood and shards of splintered glass. The shards, I knew, had once been part of small-paned windows, and as I picked one up I pondered its quality of darkness, which was perhaps the taint of toxic fumes from Goody Fowler's ominous brewing. Laughing lightly, I planted one sharp point of the shard into the tip of a finger and watched the rising bubble of blood; and then I pushed that finger into dirt and wrote the woman's name.

The coaxing wind whispered at my ears and pushed me toward my car; and I frowned slightly at the sight of my old vehicle, which seemed somehow to mar the timeless wonder I had mentally summoned from entering the region. The sound of ignition, as I turned the key, was wretchedly loud. I followed the grass-grown road and ascended the steep

slope until I arrived at the place marked on the map with a large red X. I espied the knoll on which an ancient house had been erected. Yet everything was wrong—for my forebear had told me that I would find nothing but the wreck of the homestead and an opening in the earth that was a portal to its ruined cellar. How, then, could the sight before my eyes be real—the venerable gambrel-roofed house that wore an air of incredible age? I experienced, as I looked on it, a beloved sensation, a soul-linkage with the hoary past and its secrets. I had known this sensation when reciting certain passages from antique grimoires and crumbling scrolls, when to form archaic language on my mouth was almost to taste old time. Stepping out of my hateful vehicle I spoke the remembered formula, pushing spectral language into the hungry wind; and the sparkling light of day transformed, thickened as semi-darkness, yet glistened still, as might some pearl of twilight. I clamped eyelids and harkened to the wind, in which I detected a multitude of tones. When at last I lifted my lids, I saw an assembly of souls on the veranda of the ancient house—those still forms that regarded me with charcoal eyes.

I watched, as the slits that were mouths began to twitch with movement, and although those lips moved in unison, I heard neither chant nor song. Indeed, even the wind lost its voice, although I felt its force all around me. The smallest of the figures stepped from the group and glided toward me, a diminutive creature in quaint attire. Stopping just before me, she took the map from my hand and studied it with eyes in which darkness and light coiled, and then she tore the paper to pieces that were scattered in the silent wind. There was something coy about the slight curl of her lips, and her fantastic eyes seemed to contain such qualities that I felt I mustn't gaze into them too deeply, else I would drown within their depths.

I spoke, hoping that the sound of my voice would break the spell that threatened to bewitch me utterly. "I wasn't expecting to find a house still standing. This is the old Carter residence, isn't it?"

She hummed softly to herself and took my hand, turned it over, and studied its lines. Then she clapped one dainty hand against my own and whistled at the wind. I was guided northward, down the sloping hill toward

thick woodland. How curious that it had grown so suddenly late, so that some few black stars glimmered above high autumnal boughs beneath which I found myself. Stopping to root myself to the ground, I stretched my limbs skyward and watched heaven revolve as time ceased to exist. Turning to the woman beside me, I wound the fingers of one hand tightly into her hair.

“You seem material enough,” I told her as I tugged at her pale strands. “I thought perhaps you might have been a conjuration of dream or delirium.”

She placed one hand over mine and said, “You etched my name in earth, with bloodstained flesh. Thus am I evoked out of miasmic moment.”

“A revenant from the past,” I concluded, nodding my head.

Oh, her sinister smile. “The past is real. ’Tis all there is.” With her free hand, she pointed to the ground. Looking down, I saw the large hourglass, one bulb of which was shattered. Untangling my fingers from the wraith’s pale hair, I fell to earth and studied the black sand that had spilled from its broken container, and I was mesmerized by the quality of that debris, which reminded me of the shimmering black stars above me. I reached into the ruined bulb so as to bring forth a fistful of the stuff and hissed as one finger was sliced by an edge of broken glass. The fistful of midnight particles that I lifted out of the ruined timepiece sifted through my fingers, onto earth, and liquid pearls of my blood dripped onto them.

Once more she placed her hand onto mine, and together we wrote my name in the bloodstained sand. The wind grew in force and snatched at my hair, into which it weaved. I was pulled to a standing position. The woman waltzed from me, drifting away like some eidolon of smoke and fire, her pastel hair shimmering in darkness. I followed her, through the woodland, up the slope and to the antique house where her acolytes awaited us. Their mouths moved still, but this time I could hear their noise, an inhuman din that shocked my being and seduced my soul. Ah, that puny soul, linked solidly to my heritage, to the secrets of the past, to a realm beyond dreaming. The witch stopped just before the steps of the veranda and held to me her hand, and I marveled at her ghastly beauty. Staggering to her, I touched my hand to hers and was pulled into the crowd.

Snakeladder

CODY GOODFELLOW

Cody Goodfellow has written five novels and three collections—his latest is Strategies Against Nature (King Shot Press, 2015). He wrote, co-produced, and scored the short Lovecraftian hygiene film Stay at Home Dad, which can be viewed on YouTube. He is also director of the H. P. Lovecraft Film Festival—San Pedro, and co-founder of Perilous Press, an occasional micropublisher of modern cosmic horror. A collection of his Cthulhu Mythos fiction, Rapture of the Deep, appeared in 2016 from Hippocampus Press.



T WAS SUPPOSED TO BE BEAUTIFUL.

That's what Larry Loomis kept thinking, as he and Rod "Sgt. Rock" Doherty raced down out of the Sierra Nevadas for the state line, too freaked even to look back at what was chasing them.

They were riding Harley police-surplus choppers on the Lincoln Highway, on a mission to open the Third Eye of America. When Doherty turned south at the fork, Loomis followed, even though they were sent to Reno and Colorado. The road twisted and twitched under his wheels, but he fought to keep from opening the throttle wide to get away from the titanic wheels of black fire that hounded them out of Donner, from what they had seen there, from what they'd been seeing ever since.

Beautiful... the word a meaningless noise like the girl screaming in his ear, and the scream of the things that ripped her off his back and carried her into the wind.

He knew he was still hallucinating... but she was still gone. (*Her name, it was...*) Whatever Loomis thought he saw, Rock must've seen it too, because he nearly blew Loomis away shooting at it.

He didn't kid himself he knew what was real anymore, but he could still taste the ashes of Donner dissolving in his tears, could taste the lives of people in them. And the road was paved with things that screamed like damned souls louder than the wind when he drove over them.

The land was an animal mad with agony. You could close your eyes and chant a mantra, but you'd still hear it screaming, smell it rotting. The ridges and rolling hills were jutting extrusions of crumbling, necrotic bone from blistered plains of road-raped flesh, the highways cracked scabs over shrieking wounds, black and pulsating with infection. And perched atop

every festering cyst, like a tick or a leech—gas stations, supermarkets, churches...

And yet the unbearable panorama of the dying earth was a mercy compared to the orgiastic abominations tumbling and copulating in a sky like a mad aquarium, teeming with such density of misbegotten forms as to blot out the sun on this beautiful late May day.

So very different from yesterday, when the roads were the vital capillaries and arteries of America, pumping them inexorably toward the source of the nation's soul-sickness.

Everything was beautiful, Adam would tell him, if you saw it with the Third Eye wide open. *Heaven and Hell are here, if you have eyes and the will to see them. Everything that lives is One, and that's beautiful. Everything dies, and that's beautiful, too.* He liked to go down the line of fresh devotees with an eyedropper, applying the acid sacrament directly to the eyes and catching them like a tent revival preacher as they fell into the Clear White Light.

Outside of Sacramento yesterday, they'd picked up two with-it local chicks hitchhiking to Reno to catch up with the Dead, and turned them on. They went swimming in the Folsom Reservoir and joked about just dumping it all in there. Turn on the whole town, the state prison, the state capitol. They were tripping on three tabs each, and the moonlight spelled words in Sanskrit on the water and the girls bubbled over with childish giggles and witchy wisdom, and it was all so beautiful in a pastoral *Fantasia* sense, so real and rife with secret meaning, you had to figure God was somewhere watching and giving a big thumbs-up while banging angels.

It *was* beautiful, until this morning.

They saw Doherty's girl digging by the side of the motel parking lot in the morning, just before they left Donner. She kept crying that she couldn't find any dirt, and blood kept filling up the hole. Loomis was sure he saw legs sticking up out of it, like scrawny, twisted white roots. Then the horns sounded like knocking down Jericho and blackbirds came out of her head to fill up the sky and everything started to burn...

Doherty veered off the highway onto a narrow vista point overlooking the vast gray face of Lake Tahoe. Loomis fought to come down even as he screamed that they had to go back. Trying to keep the pleading out of his voice, even now, trying to impress this dead-eyed babykiller. “Didn’t you hear me, man? Didn’t you hear me calling for you to stop?”

Doherty looked at the sky over Loomis’s head. “She wasn’t with you. They didn’t come with us, remember? Some people can’t handle it.”

“I didn’t leave her, man! She—she came with me, but she got taken! She—Where did you get that gun, man? We don’t play those games...”

“*I Ching* said, ‘He calmly lifts his bow and picks off a falcon. Such prowess breaks the spirit of his challengers.’” Pulling out the automatic, Doherty ejected the magazine and reloaded, squinting through acrid tobacco smoke. “Look, those fuckers turned tail at the first sign we had teeth. Forget it. She was gone before she dropped with us. And I wouldn’t trust *you* to say what was real if you were straight.”

Loomis closed his eyes, wringing his brain like a sponge. He remembered the truck now, those angry hicks on their tail until Doherty shot at them.... “Fuck what the *I Ching* said! I know what Adam told us—but this road, this day, this shit, man, it’s not just Second Bardo vision noise.” Loomis jumped off his bike, walking around it like maybe if he turned the corner fast enough, he’d catch up to the girl.

Now he was equally sure she’d balked at riding with them, just like her spooky friend, when the pickup pulled into the motel parking lot and the pointy-headed hicks offered to spot them a ten-count to get out of town.

Doherty said, “Bad trip’s coming out of *your* head, *brother*. Keep it the fuck out of mine.”

“They’re karmic phantoms, Rock. I’m stuck in the Third Bardo Hell, and so are you! You see the same thing, don’t you? They’re real *because* we see them.”

“So stop looking. And stop dropping that shit.”

“I haven’t dropped since last night!” Loomis patted himself down for his poke. “It’s not just me, man. Everybody back there... Maybe they all got dosed, man. Maybe somebody...”

"The whole town? When did *somebody* do that?"

"You think it was *me*?"

"You were the one kept talking about doing it."

"You think I could do that?"

"Well, it wasn't me. We're still sitting on the whole package. I think the only one dosed is you."

Loomis tried to roll a joint, but the grass spilled out. "OK. If it wasn't real, then what were you shooting at?"

Doherty shook his head like an Etch-A-Sketch.

"We're inside the Nightmare," Loomis said. "The collective fear that's feeding on everyone, fucking up everything good we try to do... They're chasing us..."

"Bullshit." Doherty walked off to the edge of the vista point, where the sun just began to stir over the horizon, lit a Lucky Strike. "Nobody's fucking chasing us."

Loomis tried to turn it off. He didn't drop this morning, but the hallucinations only seemed to get stronger, feeding on his hysteria. Maybe if he could shut his mind off for a minute, the rising sun wouldn't look like blacklight, that same hideous ultraviolet fire that seemed to eat up Donner. The landscape wouldn't look like screaming meat, the tarmac underfoot squirming with worms white as bones. The sky wouldn't writhe with those things he'd taken to calling blackbirds, though they weren't really black and they sure as shit weren't birds.

Loomis tried making it small. This was only happening to him, and in the grand scheme of the cosmic dance, and what was he? A mote, an atom, an island...

He tried making it big. If every atom of his being contained another universe, were all the heads on all the worlds in all the galaxies in just one atom on his hand aware of just how fucking far from groovy things were, up here? Were *their I Chings* predicting fallout from their flophouse God's bad acid trip?

"You're afraid," Loomis said. "Sgt. Rock is afraid to go back!"

“Don’t fucking call me that. I’m not afraid, I just know there’s no goddamn point. Those girls—*didn’t—want—to come—with us.*”

Cars passed by like tin ducks in a shooting gallery, plastic dolls made in Taiwan inside, staring with bovine assembly-line eyes.

Her name was Emily—

The wind threw Doherty’s cigarette smoke back in Loomis’s face, stinging tears from his eyes. “Meditate on it with me, man. Maybe if we dropped again... Maybe we could see him, he’d tell us what to do...”

“No. We got our orders. We go to the next town. We turn people on. We find the right place for the Test.”

The plastic dolls rolled by, all their dead-eyed, empty-headed, hateful brothers. The cars barely swerved to avoid hitting them. “So much for the Brotherhood of Light,” Loomis said.

“Some of our brothers just can’t handle reality,” Doherty sighed.

“*You blind, deaf, dumb motherfuckers!*” Loomis picked up a rock and threw it at a passing camper with Nixon stickers on the back bumper. “*We did this for you! We’re trying to save you!*”

* * *

Back in the Haight, they didn’t just think they were revolutionaries. They were apostles in a whole new Bible, armed with the righteous flaming sword of Blue Moonlight. “*Go thou forth,*” saith *The Lord*, “*and turn on the people...*”

Adam Olcott was an outlaw general before they found the key that set them free. Smuggling hundreds of pounds of pot out of Mexico, robbing high desert pharmacies to score the good stuff. Adam took in every big stray dog from the pound before they were going to gas them. Kept them in the basement of their Haight HQ, starved them and beat them with a baton while wearing a cop uniform. Then he turned them loose, always leaving a bucket of Purina out in the yard. The neighborhood had a pack of wild dogs conditioned to attack any pigs who came around.

When they found acid—when it found them—Adam rechristened the gang the Brotherhood of Light, and they became a church. Hooked up a supply of LSD from Owsley himself and snatched up his apprentices when he retired. They worked for a year to synthesize Blue Moonlight.

The Brotherhood dropped together every day for forty-nine days—seven times seven deaths and rebirths of the ego. They were set free of fear and addiction and all society's childish games. They became a family and more, almost a species unto themselves.

Acid showed them time was a wheel; all life was one life, everything entwined with everything else; and all matter was merely vibrations, light and music. They were fleeting husks of shit and dust, but also the scattered sparks of the divine White Light. With Godhead rekindled in them, they could see the future, read minds and broadcast thoughts like ham radio signals. Society was sick, broken and silently praying for exactly the kind of Promethean miracle that they were cooking up.

Rod Doherty was just back from Vietnam. The first time he tried LSD back in Saigon, he saw the Buddha, who told him how he could atone for his thirteen confirmed kills and stop shooting smack.

Schuyler Loomis dropped out of Berkeley after his first trip showed him a perfect world that was born and flourished and died out in a mote of dust in a bar of sunlight through his dorm window as he was peaking. When the draft board came looking for him, he went underground to distribute LSD for the Brotherhood.

Adam took busloads of kids up into the mountains and dosed them before dawn. His long white-blond hair and stringy beard made him a weird amalgam of Jesus and Santa Claus, dispensing the miraculous gift of ego-death from a buckskin pouch. Then he went up a mountain with his closest brothers and shared his vision.

"Imagine a world of Brahmins, brothers—a world without the Fear. Where everyone shares and teaches and loves. America will fight us even more viciously than our brothers and sisters in Vietnam, and they're right to fear us, for we mean to kill their sickness. They are not evil or insane,

brothers. They are asleep and plugged into the Machine, as you were asleep before *your* first trip. Their American Dream has become a nightmare.

“When the time is right, you shall go out on the roads, wake this country up and set them free.”

Shedding his white robes, he went naked out onto the mountaintop and stood with arms outstretched to embrace the first rays of dawn. When they came back down, the crowd was ecstatic, weeping. *We saw Jesus*, they cried. *Twenty feet tall on the neon cross and his soul ascended into the sun...*

Adam winked at them. *See how easy?*

“This thing, it’s a drug? Bullshit, it’s not even a tool for revolution. It’s a tool for *evolution*. The agitation that inspires the pearl. The Nightmare that precedes the White Light.

“This is the new fruit of the tree, brothers. Go forth and sow it. Set them free so they won’t play the establishment’s games or fight its wars. They may be cast out of the Garden, but they will have the knowledge of Good and Evil. Look what the Summer of Love hath wrought. Let the summer of ’68 be the Summer of Wisdom.”

It was a sermon, and that’s how they took it. They were apostles, spreading the psychedelic gospel, until the raid.

The police let it be known that they’d had an undercover agent inside the Brotherhood. Adam and fourteen brothers and sisters were pinched. Loomis and Doherty and a half dozen others fled on motorcycles, each armed with a divine fiat and two million hits of LSD.

* * *

Just over the state line, they pulled into a gas station. The conifer forests had given way to high desert scrub, the land descending in shelves that went on until the Mojave. Inert sand and rock and empty yellow skies, but he could still feel its screaming in his teeth, could still see ghostly swirls in the sky like imperfections on his retina, darting out of sight whenever he tried to see them.

Loomis peeled off his goggles. “Do you hear... music?”

"I *always* hear music." Doherty climbed off the bike and wiped dust off the face of the ancient gas pump.

A grizzled old man dragged his shadow out to the pumps as if it weighed more than his body. "Ain't got no gas for you, hear? Go on..."

Doherty shoved his hand into his grimy Army jacket, flashed a roll of bills. "Not even for a vet?" He touched the gun in his pocket, red clouds spewing out of his aura.

The old man swatted his hip as if he expected to find a gun there. "You damn fool! Can't never have fought in no *real* war... *Don't you smoke your damn dope here, damn you!*"

"What's the harm, if you got no gas?" Doherty lipped a cig and lit it off a kitchen match, taking the grip off the pump.

Loomis walked around the corner of the clapboard station, looking for the restroom.

"You one of them hippies?" A young girl, maybe sixteen, barefoot in a dirty nightgown that couldn't quite reach her knees.

"I'm just a pilgrim, Miss." He went by her, intent on the restroom. She grabbed his arm.

The old man shouted at Doherty, "Get your filthy hippie asses off my property, boy, 'fore I call the sheriff!"

Kinky copper-wire hair. Freckles like dried blood, dappling blue-white skin. Big guileless golden jailbait eyes. No aura at all.

She looked up at the sun, blocking it with her trembling hand so the sunbeams flickered through her splayed fingers into her eyes, like a Gysin dream machine. "My granddaddy hates you hippies 'cos my momma ran off with a bunch of them bikers, an' never come back."

Beyond the last dead Studebaker carcass on the gas station lot, the sage and tumbleweeds had the run of the place unto the horizon. "I can't imagine why..."

She followed him into the restroom. He turned to push her out, but she grabbed the fringe on his suede deerskin jacket and dragged him close. Her pupils yawned and ate up her eyes. "You one of them He-Dogs? Them *Spider-Riders*?"

“No, ma’am, I’m not part of any biker gang. Now let me go about my business, there’s a good girl.”

“*Hare Krishna*,” she cooed, gyrating lewdly, “*Hare Hare...*” The heat from her raised blisters on his eyeballs. “You dig the Crooked Book?” Her strychnine grin saw every sick, sad thing he’d ever conceived of doing to a woman, and begged for it. “You gonna take me with you on the Backward Path to meet the Black Man? You gonna ride me skyclad into the White Light?”

Loomis couldn’t piss with that kind of talk. “The Black Man’s dead, honey, didn’t you hear the news? Some shitbird cracker shot him in Alabama.”

Turning to shoo her out, he saw her hoist her nightie up and thrust her hips at him. Something like ticks burrowed into her thighs, into the brassy corkscrew nest of her pubic arch.

Her inflamed, scorched-milk skin seethed with musky monkey-house heat that shot straight to his cock. Stumbling out the door with the girl clinging on him, he ran for Doherty. “Jesus, man, it’s happening again!”

Doherty had topped off his own tank and was filling Loomis’s while the old man twitched winged purple worms of impotent fury. “It’s *mine*, ya hear? I can refuse any man or god.” He snatched the pump away and sprayed Doherty in the face. “*Heil Hitler!*”

Gagging, spitting, the long-haired vet drew his gun. “Get on your bike, man.”

Loomis straddled his bike, but he couldn’t. This was... somehow... it was their fault. “Look, Rock... Like, no, wait...”

“TAKE ME WITH YOU!” the girl howled. Her mouth ate up her face and blackbird larvae came out every hole and fucked up the sky and put out the sun, swirled into something almost like writing just above their heads.

Doherty screeched out onto the highway, shaking the gasoline out of his hair.

Cackling like a sack of rattlers, the old man filled himself up with Hi-Test. The hollow girl chased down the highway after him, flailing her arms

and shrieking until the purple fire ate her up and she was just a dirty nightgown on the desert wind.

* * *

They were afraid to stop after that. There was nowhere to stop, anyway. No signs, no exits. Nothing but the road.

The sunlight was sick, mottled submarine beams through crematory clouds of tallow. The desert succumbed to fields of creeper vines with vast purple-black leaves like scaly batwings. Every now and again, the carpet mounted into hillocks and mounds where the pernicious reptilian weed had swallowed a town. Great spires of fungi at every crossroads erupted in fairy rings like standing stones and cathedrals of rot, spires like smokestacks vomiting spores into the yellow sky. Towering termite mounds throbbed out AM transmissions of insectoid evangelists and mad mandible jazz muzak he could feel in his fillings.

When they pulled over at an abandoned truck stop, Loomis strayed off the pavement. The creepers here sported voluptuous white lilies that drew clouds of blowflies with their venereal carrion musk.

“Don’t go out there, you idiot,” Doherty warned him. He went behind a propane tank and squatted to take a shit.

“Why, it’s not real, right? It’s all just a bad trip, right?” He waded into the thickness of creeper and kicked at the leaves. Underneath, the tangles of fleshy white roots so resembled a mess of human bodies that he blundered backwards and fell into it.

The roots squirmed around his hands and feet. He ripped them out in repulsive, maggoty fistfuls but only exposed fatter roots underneath, boneless fingers grubbing and clutching through garbage and crumbling skulls and nowhere a speck of honest earth.

Loomis clawed and shrieked his way out of the patch in a red panic. The rambling gas station, diner, and general store were gutted hulks overgrown with creepers and fungi. Epileptic flashes of black, broken wings obscured the black vampire sun.

But every time he blinked, did he not see the same place with trucks and cars everywhere, and a gathering crowd of red-blooded Americans gaping at him like something escaped from a sideshow?

"We got to get." Doherty sat on his bike and lit a Lucky. "You're losing your fucking mind."

"Don't you see it, man? It's covering the whole fucking country like kudzu. And the people are trapped in it."

Doherty took him by the arm. "Come on, man. People are starting to stare."

"What people? Where?"

Doherty put Loomis on his bike. "The ones you're trying to save."

* * *

They camped out on a ridge of naked rock like a broken backbone beside the highway. Loomis huddled too close to the fire, staring into it. Embers flew up from the resinous deadwood, guttered and died like stars in his hair, on his shoulders.

"The Fear, man," he said. "It's got its teeth in us both."

"Forget it," Doherty said. "You're having *their* nightmares now. It's dangerous to wake up a sleepwalker." He sat hunched over his Army jacket, ripping the unit patches off the sleeves to make room for more embroidered flowers. "You're still seeing what the Machine wants you to see."

Loomis was stupefied from smoking a fistful of joints, but serenity was like soft music in a long lost room in his head with no doors or windows. He couldn't get into it. "All this shit, man... Like—the acid gives you ideas, and the crazy things Adam told us start to make sense... but this Machine they'd all go on about... It's like a metaphor, right? I never literally *saw* it before."

"What you saw today," Doherty said, "that was nothing. I've seen it. Seen it eating, over in Vietnam. I was one of the lucky fuckers who got to help feed it."

"Bullshit."

Doherty shook his head, his sunken eyes blank as dice in his sunburned face. "It's not a real machine, but it uses people... gets into them and uses them up from the inside out, fills them with itself. It looks like whatever it wants to look like. Some generals over there liked to think they invoked it to win the war, but it was always with us. They made ungodly burnt offerings of the Cong, but they found it ran best when we fed it our own boys."

Loomis jumped up and came around the fire at Doherty. The smoke reared up and wafted in his eyes. "This isn't Viet-fucking-Nam, Rock! What the hell is wrong with people out here?"

He was a while answering, as if reading it in the fire. "I think the Machine is breaking down, and it's driving everybody crazy. They're just starting to realize they've been eating themselves."

"Maybe it is something in the water." Loomis sat on a rock, but jumped back up as if he'd been burned. "That's why Hoover's so flipped out over the Weathermen or the NVA dosing the water supply... because they're already doing it!"

"You're talking crazy," Doherty snorted. "Go to sleep."

"Ever since we took that shit, there's monsters everywhere. Maybe something's wrong..."

"Maybe it's finally making you see the truth."

"But it's supposed to set you free, man, it's supposed to liberate you from all their ego games."

"Set everybody free. You're a regular modern Prometheus. Set them free to do what?"

"Tear down the fucking Machine, man!"

Doherty sighed, lay back to stare into the dark black night. "When you were a kid, did you ever play that board game, Snakes & Ladders?"

Loomis scratched his stubbled chin. "You mean Chutes & Ladders, right?"

"They changed it for American consumption, but everywhere else, it's snakes. It's an ancient Indian game to teach how karma works. They called it *moksha patam*... 'Ladder to Salvation.'"

“You’re talking crazy. My folks thought it was supposed to show you how to be good.”

“Right. But it’s all in the roll of the dice, all in where you land. That’s the real lesson. We go where we’re moved, we eat what we’re given. We serve those who feed on us.”

“That’s the Machine talking, man. We’re gonna change all that.”

Doherty slipped on his jacket, threw his unit patches and insignia into the fire. “If the wrong man uses the right means, then the right means work in the wrong way.”

“Did the *I Ching* say that?”

“I said that.” Doherty curled up in a wool Army blanket. “The *I Ching* said, ‘Go to sleep, hippie.’”

But he couldn’t. He lay there thinking of the lunatics at the gas station, the vigilante assholes in Donner, wondering, *Who’s the wrong man? Them—or us?*

This negativity had to be coming from somewhere. Maybe it was Doherty. Maybe he was the informant who turned in the Brotherhood, maybe even a double agent, with a headful of bugs and wires... the Machine. He had to know.

He’d known he wouldn’t sleep anyway, so right before the meal, he’d dropped a tab from their traveling stash. He felt guilty. He knew what Doherty would say. Taking it alone like this made it just another crutch, and it could blow up in his face. His fear never left, but it faded behind the familiar quickening of the drug.

Right away, he regretted it.

Blue Moonlight was cosmic mother’s milk. Bathed in its radiance, the awesome hidden, Platonic meaning of everything shone through so hard you could almost see the vast, slow wavelengths of the collective human dream laced through the plastic phantasmagoria of waking life, like the ghost of the perfect child in a dirty old man’s aura.

This stuff was spiky violet fire in his brain, bitter strychnine rictus like drinking hemlock, like—

Like Death screwing itself into his mind. Feel the electric venom infuse his thoughts and grow them into gnarly, interlocking labyrinths. Feel that he had ingested something alive, intent, crouching in the back of his skull with him, watching and waiting.

Exhausted, terrified, he searched in vain for that familiar old acid magic, where Reality looked you dead in the eye and smiled and said, *Be cool, Larry! Everything is groovy—*

Maybe it was bullshit, but acid made him feel like he was part of it all, as if he wasn't a mistake trapped in a broken joke. Maybe religion was bullshit too, but if it kept everyone from offing themselves in the Dark Ages, if it inspired all that art, then real or not, it was priceless, right?

The first time he dropped acid, it was like seeing in color for the first time ever. He felt a vital purpose to the whole world for the first time since he learned how to think and talk in words. He could tell that for others, like Doherty, it was nothing more than a righteous high. But for him, it was a messenger, promising miracles.

To come through as a true Brother of Light, you had to die and dissolve in the Clear White Light and rise 7X7 times. Loomis did it with gusto, praying his brain would dissolve forever in the White Light, trying to stay in that place beneath and before words. But every time he dropped, he came down in a bad place. The Fear came and skinned him alive. He saw faces in the dark.

He would retreat into a bathtub in a pitchblack room, watching the endless parade of black-and-white snapshots of faces he'd never seen before. Like mugshots or school portraits, every race, every age. They wouldn't go away until he figured out what they were, he knew. This was some Third Bardo Hell Leary's book left out.

Adam told him he was being too literal. The *Tibetan Book of the Dead* was about the death of the ego, and the beginning of enlightenment. Adam also told him that he was seeing the faces of the dead. Loomis kept it to himself after that, because the suggestion felt right. It ended the pictures, anyway.

Now, instead of the Clear White Light, he saw only the faces, an endless procession that came out of the electrified violet void of his clenched eyelids. He watched the faces all night, believing, focusing, channeling his energy pattern through the aether to any Brother who might receive it, if he was tripping on the same frequency. He meditated upon it until dawn, but he saw only the faces.

But this one time, he saw one face more than once, the only one he'd ever recognized, shuffled in among the thousands upon thousands of strange, blank masks like Jokers in an endless deck.

Adam's face.

* * *

Loomis wanted to go to Mexico.

The road south dropped down into a flat, wide valley, stubbly with mesquite and Joshua trees. A peeling billboard showed Old Glory with her stripes faded algae-green and said, LOVE IT OR LEAVE IT.

From a distance, it looked like a proper town. Doherty wanted to stop.

Only one thin cloud hung in the sky. They passed into its shadow and the sun went out.

The sky was black with crooked wings. Loomis threw up an arm to fend them off, shuddering at the frigid, sticky sting of piano-wire slashes flaying away jacket and hair and scalp... the battery-acid taste of their half-ghostly ichor splashing his goggles and running into his screaming mouth, the icy numbness that left him half-paralyzed at seventy miles per hour.

He screamed as he grabbed blindly for the right handlebar and twisted the throttle wide open while slurring across the road. He screamed for Doherty, and he screamed in terror at understanding that was somehow worse than the unreasoning fear of the unknown.

For just as the grotesque creeper plague that covered the desert was not a plant, the blackbirds were not vultures or locusts, but flying seeds of the Machine. Their leathery wings were creeper leaves. Their familiar stench—

more acrid, charnel, masculine—choked the air in milky, opaque clouds like squid ink.

Struggling to balance on the bike, to control his flailing arms, he tried to look for Doherty without wrecking them both. He tried to tell himself this wasn't real, but he could feel it peeling him apart. If he stopped, he'd be eaten alive. He couldn't see anything past his hand in front of his face, couldn't hear anything but the sword-in-scabbard rasp of those beating wings like scaly shadows and the crystal-set tinny shriek of the girl he thought he'd left back at the motel.

And they were gone.

The sun blinded him. The blaring of an air horn made him grab for the handlebars. He was well over the center line and headed for a collision with a Peterbilt eighteen-wheeler.

Screaming like a baby, he wrenched the bike across the dotted white line. The semi blew past so quickly that Loomis heard and smelled more than saw its contents. The wafting trail of their passage reeked more of death than of living filth. Bodies packed into cages on the open flatbed trailer wailed for salvation. Swarms of phantom parasites trailed the highballing semi like seagulls over a garbage heap.

He looked sideways at Doherty. The vet's bike cruised right alongside his own, on his left, but Doherty wasn't on it.

Loomis looked back over his shoulder. The ribbon of black tar ran straight as geometry over the horizon, and except for the receding truck, there was nothing to see but the cloud, which seemed to be following him, its shadow a seething purple curtain of blackbirds.

He should go back. Doherty was...

Gone, real gone... and so are you.

* * *

The town had everything they had been looking for. A nice Main Street with shops, a courthouse, and a bandstand in the center of town, and a big green water tower looming over the horizon.

Loomis pulled up at the Esso station, and his bike swerved out from under him like a dying mule. Two tires flat. Tacks and tiny caltrops scattered around the pavement. A man stood outside the barbershop waving, but remained frozen when Loomis shouted for help.

The sun passed behind that cloud. The town disappeared under a uniform coat of leprous, rustling red-black wings. They covered everything, even the frozen man—everything but the line of BSA's, Indians, and Harleys suddenly arrayed out front of the courthouse. Banners and battle flags of scalps and garlands of ears dangled from the handlebars, fizzing with flies.

Loomis barged into the sheriff's office. "Sir, please help me, you've got to... help."

The sheriff sat at his desk with his feet up, head tipped back with a stub of cigar in his yellow dentures, agape in wonderment at his brains issuing like clouds of smoke from the third eye in his forehead. He took no notice of Loomis, even when he came around the front desk.

The frozen corona of brain matter haloed a man in a spotless white Nehru suit who stood before the sheriff's desk, twirling a chrome-plated, pearl-handled revolver on one finger. His wild ivory hair swirled about on his head as if he were underwater when he turned to look at Loomis through thick horn-rimmed glasses. The long, delicate bones of his face, the high, pale dome of his forehead suggested a visitor from an older, wiser world. He held a phone to his ear, smiling like a child making a prank call. "Have no fear, my dear Red Queen," he said. "Alice just walked in."

Loomis turned to run, but a grinning biker stood in the doorway. His greasy denim vest was encrusted with alchemical symbols and an embroidered legend—SPIDER RIDERS—CARCOSA CHAPTER. There were more behind him, blood-rimmed grins spilling out into the street.

The white man hung up and ambled over to Loomis. His hand was warm and soft and nervous, like a featherless bird. "Dr. Schuyler Sutton, M.D., Ph.D.; Harvard, Castalia, Langley. I worked with Leary and Metzner. Now I serve the Universe."

Loomis gripped his hand like he was afraid it would vanish. Thank god, finally someone who'd understand! "Loomis. Please, Doc—I just want to get the fuck out of here."

"Come eat with me. Where's your friend?"

"Something got him. He crashed—outside of town, I think. Listen, man, you gotta help me. You know what's wrong with this place..."

"Wrong?" He looked around at the petrified sheriff, at the giggling, bloody bikers. "What could possibly be wrong with this pastoral scene? It's not the place, friend. It's *you*."

Sutton walked down the middle of the street, Loomis keeping closer to him than to the bikers at his back. "How ironic that society is so petrified of these barbarians, when they're really the best friends the establishment ever had."

Sutton walked into the diner and Loomis dumbly followed him to a booth. The waitress brought Sutton a tall strawberry milkshake and a pitcher of orange juice. "I really must apologize for the way things have been handled," he said. "It's so hard to maintain objectivity under these conditions. You know in those westerns, where the Indian lays his head on the road and he can hear the outlaws coming? I could feel the vibrations the moment you climbed onto the Snakeladder."

"I don't know what that is."

"But you're *soaking* in it. Here, you must be parched. Have some orange juice."

He pushed it across the table. The juice tasted rancid... familiar...

"Did you really think you could just get enlightenment by taking drugs? Yogis and monks spend their whole lives staring into the abyss, but you kids believed you could just drop and figure it all out."

Loomis clasped his shaking hands between his knees. "Please, man—I just want to come down. I don't even know what's real anymore."

"Excellent! Well, then you *are* ready for the big one. The one thing that isn't real is you." He sat back and licked the cherry off his milkshake. "You don't exist. None of us do, not the way we think. It's not the world or

the barriers between us that are the illusion. This town, for example... By the time it takes its next breath, we'll probably all be dead."

Dig that wide white embalmer's smile. "No. What's got to go is the idea that we exist as separate things, at all. That's what Snakeladder is for. To show them how it all works. What you're seeing isn't a dream. You're not even the Dreamer. You're a bit player in the dream. And the Dreamer needs to wake up."

"Fuck you."

Spooning the whipped cream into his mouth, Sutton said, "You know the stuff Hoffman got LSD from was a mold that infested grains in Europe in the Dark Ages? Folks would eat it and lose their minds, see hell and devils, the Apocalypse. Then their extremities rotted off. We fixed that part, at least.

"Snakeladder went back to the original ergot. They made it at Stanford to fight back against hippie acid. It's a very medieval high, wouldn't you say? The scales fall away. My boys outside were one of the first experimental groups. You're a control group. Your tablets are placebos, a mild decongestant."

"But we've been on a bum trip all week. And all these people..."

"Because it's already *in* you. It comes off you like a fever, and anyone who spends more than a few minutes with you or, God forbid, touches you, will go, too."

"Go where?"

"Up the Snakeladder. Or down."

"You're all wrong, man. Adam sent us out to spread it."

"Sorry. The cops didn't kill your guru. We did. He wasn't into Snakeladder, so we intercepted his shipment. We're doing it everywhere. We've got ten million tablets and a swimming pool of the liquid. Waiting for the moment to arise."

"You're going to drive the whole country insane."

"No, it's like you said. We're going to show them the truth. Those interstitial dimensions—they're plastic. They take more than their shapes from our dreams. Everything needs food and water to survive, right? If

there's a place where life can live, there you go. Thoughts go out from our brains all day long, and maybe once in a while we make contact, but it seems to go to waste. You idiots almost figured out how to do it. But once you've accepted that everything is everything, you have nothing to fear from the Great Night."

Serpentine shadows like sinister cigarette smoke wove a tangle over the table. Loomis looked up, fist tensed on his steak knife. Heat-haze wriggled out of Sutton's head like Pigpen's comic-strip stink lines, or gasoline fumes.

Sutton chuckled. "It's kicking in, isn't it? Starting to see them again."

"You fucking... drugged me..."

The oily, eely smile again. "You're welcome."

The heat-haze all around Sutton was an endless rat-king tangle of snakes, scorpions, and tapeworms, all eyeless, undulating gullets and razor-fanged anuses burrowing into Sutton's head. He seemed to enjoy it.

"Ever wonder where thoughts go when you forget, or why you can never remember your dreams? Astral lampreys, aether-worms... They've always been here; the first time somebody had a dream, they came to eat it."

Loomis's gaze kept tilting up, leaving his jaw on his chest. The ghostly tails extended up through the ceiling, trailed off in fans or barbed stingers twitching whenever the waitress came too close. Everything was suffused with a subtle phosphorescent glow quite unlike LSD or psilocybin. Everything tingled with an unspeakable secret. The humming of the molecules tittered that he alone wasn't in on the joke.

"Once you get on the Snakeladder, you see that everything is not one family, but one organism, feeding on itself. Once you see the Invisible World, you begin to reap its benefits. You learn to eat each other without leaving marks, how to get high at the push of a thought-button, how to plant your dreams in others, how to cloud their minds so they can't see you at all."

An ethereal stinger lashed out and spiked the waitress in her throat. She gagged and spun round, reeled in by the segmented tentacle to accept a wide-mouthed kiss from Sutton. He spewed melted ice cream and

something greener than melon liqueur into her mouth. She gulped it, stumbling back behind the counter as if she'd guzzled weed killer.

Sutton tilted his head to point at something under the table. "Sorry baby," he said, "you've got to take a number."

Loomis peeked, dreading the sight of a gun or—he really could have accepted anything at that point—anything but what he saw.

Even tripping on Snakeladder, he could see clean through her. She trapped just enough of the dingy diner light to appear as a cobalt shadow curled up under the table in Sutton's lap. His fly undone, his flaccid white member exposed, yet it was enfolded in an opacity that writhed and fixed two accusing eyes on Larry.

It was Emily, the girl he left in Donner.

The one they ripped off his bike, a chain around her neck...

"No, no! That's not—"

"I don't pretend to know. Whether it's whatever leaves the body when you yank it off the back of a motorcycle. Maybe it's just some critter that feasts on that poor girl's soul, and it just looks like that sweet redneck poontang you androgynous eunuchs never made proper use of, anyway. Whatever she is, she polishes a mighty mean helmet."

Loomis looked around. The steak knife was the nearest thing to a weapon.

"Everything your bullshit guru promised, everything that fake Leary promised. You want to know where Snakeladder came from? It's kind of a chicken or egg scenario, really.

"See, this one Harvard washout who worked for the CIA... They came to him and they were fretting that these kids who were turning on wouldn't fight their wars. So we set out to turn them on to the truth. Show them the really real."

Smiling immodestly, he went on, "We got a bunch of mystics and gurus and just-plain addicts. You should've seen the phantasms we used to pull out of their godforsaken noggins! Such wonders... We pumped them full of lab-grade ergot-cultures until they manifested their parasites in ectoplasm.

The more we fixed on them, the realer they got, until we could touch them—and taste them.”

His sickly chuckle cut off when he coughed up something and struggled to swallow it. “Seriously, once you’ve tasted the dream-meat of something that feeds on prayers, you never go back.”

He took off his clip-on shades. The sluices of his sockets brimmed with tiny eyes like caviar. Now and then as he spoke, one of them burst and something took wing.

He smiled at Loomis’s hand on the knife, seemed to see it just fine. “The world is alive. It is a great macro-organism striving toward consciousness, toward Godhead. That’s the good news. The bad news is, this world isn’t a loving mother, it’s barely even a single cell in the senescent cosmic brain. The universe is alive, see, and bootstrapping toward full awakening, too. And what do you suppose happens to one cell in the brain when it starts thinking and acting like a little mind, all on its own?”

In a body, they called it cancer. “We—only took it once?”

“That’s all it takes, son. Nothing ever goes back to normal, once you turn on that light. Hell of a way to do business, since nobody needs a second dose.

“And the best part? Once it’s coming off you, it’s not even like a germ or a virus, it’s like radio waves. You’re a transmitter, beaming that old Snakeladder muzak everywhere you go. Everywhere you go, you’re going to open up their eyes. And let them all in.”

“But—we’re *trying* to open them. We’re trying to save them.”

“Save this country? From what? Itself? You’re trying to come between a wolf and its meal, boy. In its dreams, this nation is a little child, pure at heart and innocent. You wake it up to what it really is.

“You’ve heard about what we’re doing over in the Asian theater—what they’ve got going down South and in Watts and Detroit and every overflowing, godforsaken misery-factory in this great nation... All that blood spilled, all that flesh burnt and poured into the sky to call down a god who can fix this shit, and for what?”

“Why are you doing this? Why do you hate us so fucking much?”

Grinning, Sutton reached up to seize one of the phantom lampreys attached to his brain and crushed its questing spinal tap snout in his teeth. “Because not everyone’s made to be saved. Some are born to be meat for the beast.”

His mouth opened. Eyes hatched and gave him a halo of larvae. Head exploded.

Sutton started to get out of the booth, but then sank back down, completely gone from the smile up.

Loomis spun around with his hands up.

Doherty dropped a shotgun on the counter and grabbed a pitcher of water. He poured it down his open mouth and splashed it over a mess of road rash down his left arm. “This has gone far enough.”

“You saw it too! You know it was real!”

“I didn’t see anything,” Doherty said, “because I never took the shit.”

“*What?*”

“I never took it. I dropped Blue Moonlight with you guys back in the Haight, but I never touched *this* shit.”

“Because you *knew* something was wrong with it.” Loomis got out of the booth, backing away from Doherty, toward Sutton’s corpse seething with blackbird larvae. “Because you’re a... fucking narc.”

Doherty shook his head. “Don’t sell yourself short, cheese. You long-haired faggots made Mr. Hoover’s Hit Parade.”

In his rising hysteria, Loomis barely heard what Doherty said. “Well, call the fucking cavalry, man! Have them come stop this shit.”

“Sorry, but it doesn’t work like that. The old Queen sends us in to infiltrate you stupid hippie gangs to spy on your plans to overthrow the government, and the same thing always happens. We always end up in charge. Then *we* become the Enemy.

“I tried to call them in Donner. I think I’ve been written off. This has gotten bigger than putting drugs in the water supply. They’re looking for a way to win the war.”

“You never took it?” Loomis stumbled, sliding in the putrid afterbirth streaming from Sutton’s corpse. “But you don’t need to take it. *I* took it. You know you’re seeing it. And if you can see it...”

He tossed Doherty a pack of matches so he could light his last Lucky. “Then they can see *you*.”

Doherty lit his cigarette. The nicotine rush to his brain bloomed brighter than the guttering sulfur flare of the match.

The strung-out sponge of Loomis’s brain offered no fresh habitat for the displaced swarms of Machine larvae. He let his mind sink into a meaningless anxiety mantra—*heil Krishna, Hare Hitler...*

Doherty’s awakening gray matter was a klieg light in the shadowy realm between matter and shadow that was their home. They engulfed his mind so ravenously that he arched back over the counter and kicked in the air. His seizures continued as Loomis rushed out the door, out into the Clear White Light.

* * *

The world dissolved like a cat in an acid bath. And in its place, through the blinding white torrent of light, he began to perceive the lattice of threads weaving itself all around him. Light in cascading violet chains yoked together all the gray constellations of drab dwarf stars that his spinning mind supposed must be the people of this miserable town—the weird ladders of scaly, darksome vital essence sucked out of them, feeding the blurry darting, drifting swarms of astral parasites all around and the mob of festering black holes who were Sutton’s biker gang. Gasping with horror, at last he saw the grand design of Snakes and Ladders, the mindless, grinding transactions of attraction and appetite.

The web of universal vampirism engulfed the earth, from fiery pyres of mass apoptosis that delineated human cities, to the rarefied deeps of the oceans, where strange energies were traded and trapped between entities even Loomis’s activated third eye could barely perceive.

Woven throughout it was the hideous avarice of the Machine, that ectoplasmic empire that physically engulfed hundreds of thousands of empty vessels throughout the corridors of power of every nation; that held billions more in thrall through endless warfare and tyranny and economic competition, milking them like cattle, cultivating their misery like wine from fermented fruit.

He floated up and out, and his breath was quite literally stolen away.

As below, so above—

A tangle of twisted ladders arched up from the earth and out into the void to embrace some ravenous thing that gestated insidiously in the molten metal heart of the sun, and something else ancient beyond reckoning coiled up in the dead slag-mound of the moon, basking in a great tidal vortex of lunacy and longing that raked the earth like diseased fangs.

And even further out, the cold void of light years of darkness was choked with such ghastly ultraviolet auroras of bodiless consciousness as made the quivering idiot *I AM* at the center of creation seem like a mere amoeba on a glass slide. Such colossal macrocosmic appetites skulked among those interstellar synapses of God's unholy thoughts like spiders in a stifling, windowless attic, astral antennae quivering in excitement for the aura of any awakened one... that Loomis had no choice but to surrender.

The Clear White Light of the All-in-One shone out from the cracks in between this and every other universe. It offered no answers. It was beyond all questioning. Knowing nothing, wanting nothing... being nothing.

It was beautiful—

The Walker in the Night

JASON C. ECKHARDT

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AY, BOY, I'LL TAKE ONE OF THOSE.

Buster Weeden digs into his pocket, withdraws a handful of tinkling coins; picks out a nickel with thumb and forefinger and hands it to the waiting newsboy. Keep the change, kid. The boy pockets the nickel, hands Weeden today's *Providence Journal*. Pinches the brim of his cap and walks off down Exchange Place bawling headlines.

Weeden snaps open the *Journal* and gives it the once-over. Depression's still on—no news there, just ask any Joe on the street—and the Germans are at it again in Europe. But when are they not? Forecast: rain, probably heavy today and tomorrow, cooler. Well, they missed the boat on that one. Warm and sunny this last day of summer, 1938, in the good city of Providence, State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations. Too warm for the jacket looped over Weeden's arm. A few horsetails blowing up from the south and a funny yellow tinge to the sky, but no rain, nossuh. The Industrial Trust Building (still tallest in New England, so *there*, Boston) stands out against that sallow sky like a gigantic black tombstone. Howard hated that *Art Deco nightmare*, but he'd have liked that effect. Of course, Howard's been cold in the ground in Swan Point this past year and some. But still, he would have liked it.

Exiting Exchange Place on Fulton, Weeden crosses the river over the Crawford Street Bridge. Off to the left the open space of Memorial Square with its seventy-five-foot column to the dead of the Great War—Suicide Circle to the locals, cars whipping around it like maddened bees. College Hill rises before him in the heavy green shades of late summer; gables and steeples peep out of the trees like shy giants. Cars purr, hoot, spin past. Weeden ignores them. As he always does, he looks right down the river to

the harbor. Not that there's anything new there, either—same old steamers, tugs, fishing boats, the antique white bulk of the side-wheeler *Annawan*. The harbor is as still as glass—flat as a mill-pond, his mother would have said. The wide reaches of Narragansett Bay beyond to the south, too. Boats slice across it in the silence of distance and the Vs of their wakes fade as quickly as they form. And over it all, that queer yellow sky. Weeden thinks, Maybe the paper got it right after all. I'm no weatherman, nor mariner (his father, God bless him, knows that, after all those frustrating hours out on the Bay in a catboat when Buster was a boy). But even I know this *bodes ill*. There's Howard again, no doubt. Weeden doesn't talk like that. Only Howard Lovecraft would come out with a gem like that these days—and now even he's gone. Sure gonna miss that old ghoul, Weeden thinks as he cuts right down South Water Street. How that man could talk.

Weeden reaches the E-Z Lunch just before two. He walks in, smiles at the regulars at the counter, slings his hat and coat on the coat-tree. Steps around the counter, drops the paper by the shabby gent on the end. He picks up an apron and ties it on just as Rocco takes his off—two gears in the same little machine. Weeden glances around to make sure no ladies are present, says Hey you wop bastard, how's the trade?

Rocco shrugs, waggles his hand. Slow, Bustah, slow. Rocco scoops his hat off the coat-tree and onto his black pomade in one smooth motion. In another he exits the diner and is gone. Weeden turns to the grill, shaves an epidermis of crisped grease off it with his spatula. Turns back to the afternoon trade at the counter. Usual suspects: that hand from the *Annawan*, Mr. Arnold from the bank on his two-hour lunch (doesn't he know there's a depression on?), some 'bo down from the India Street railyards, no doubt. This last is carefully counting his pennies on the counter. Even through the grease-and-burger atmosphere Weeden can smell the guy. Christ, why doesn't he spend the dough on a bath instead of a sandwich? But Weeden's polite, asks the guy What'll you have? The 'bo looks up from his pennies as if from the grave of his best friend.

Ham sandwich.

Coffee.

Please.

Weeden pivots back to his grill and Coldspot Super Six refrigerator (that cost a pretty penny but worth it) and starts assembling a ham sandwich. Gonna be a long evening, he thinks. Same old crowd, same old conversations. Not even conversations, really. Lectures. Soliloquies—now *there's* a good Lovecraft word for you. Soliloquies about what a jerk the mate aboard the *Annawan* is, what the stock market is doing (as if anybody has two dimes to rub together, never mind invest), where's the best place in town to get a haircut. Weeden could write it out, word for word. Not like talking to Lovecraft—or even just listening to him. Better'n a radio play, and always something new. Guy knew local history as if he'd lived it, and he could tell it so that you felt as if *you* had lived it, too. Red heels and periwigs on Benefit Street, patriots in tricorns marching off to burn the *Gaspée*, the Great Gale of 1815 that carried away the Great Bridge and drove ships up as far as the Market House. And his own stories—Christ! Howard gave Weeden a couple to read—one about some octopus-thing out to destroy the world—Kooloo? Cathuly? And a novel about a wizard right here in Providence. That one even had a character named Weeden in it.

That's right, Weeden thinks, turning to hand the ham sandwich to the tramp. That's how we got to talking. Me, I was working the graveyard shift, and in walks this fella, middle of the night, and him dressed to the nines. Takes off his hat—a gray Homburg, Weeden remembers—hangs it carefully on the coat-tree. Sits on the stool like he's sitting down to dinner at the Biltmore. A coffee, if you will—a real gent. Weeden brings him the java. Guy pours in a measure of cream and spoons in five—count 'em, five—sugars. Takes a sip.

He's staring at something over Weeden's shoulder—the E-Z Lunch's license from the City of Providence hanging by the Coldspot.

Are you Mr. Weeden? the guy asks.

Folks call me Buster, Weeden says, offers his hand. Guy takes it. His grip is soft to Weeden's calluses.

My name is Lovecraft, he says, Howard Lovecraft. I am a writer. He says this as if it explains everything, the high, quiet voice, the intense brown eyes, his presence in a waterfront greasy-spoon at one A.M.

And in a way, it does. He walks at night to think, he says, get ideas for his stories.

Ever been published?

Lovecraft smiles demurely (definitely a Lovecraft word). Here and there, he says. I beg your pardon (he goes on) if I was forward in asking about your patronymic.

My what? Weeden frowns.

Your name, Lovecraft explains. It is a fine old Yankee name, extending back to the gracious days of the Colony.

And just like that they start talking. That first night it's easy—Lovecraft's the only customer—and they cover a lot of ground. Turns out they're both native Providence boys (though Howard grew up on the East Side and Buster down off Smith Hill), even know a couple of the same folks. But aside from that they don't really have a lot in common. Buster gets the feeling that this strange, brilliant man is lonely. Why else would he be talking to a jomoke like him? Maybe he just doesn't have many people to talk to, Weeden thinks, and pours Lovecraft another cup of coffee.

Lovecraft visits often after that. Not every night, but two-three times a week. Sometimes it's in the afternoon, coming back from one of his epic walks. Guy even walks to Lincoln and Johnston, for cripe's sake. Did the man never hear of buses? Cuts through Federal Hill and even the guineas don't give him a hassle. Weeden has seen Lovecraft go off down the street and doesn't think he'd bother him, either. There's a restless, burning energy to the man, a regular dynamo in a blue suit. Can barely sit still. That same electricity fires his walking. Tall, thin, intense, Lovecraft strides through the everyday *like a Pharaoh out of antient Egypt* (way he said it, you could even hear the funny spelling, Weeden smiles and shakes his head). He walks—walked, Weeden sadly corrects himself—as if he were on some kind of mission.

And really, how many times could you walk over the same old streets? One night after they had gotten to know each other a little better, Howard had an answer for that:

I'm making sure everything is in its place.

As if things would fall apart without his supervision. And he made that odd, bound-up smile of his. Other times he'd gas on and on about the inborn connection of a soul to its native soil, of the almost mystical linkage of the Yankee to the rock-ribbed hills and gambrel-roofed cottages of New England, his by tradition-buttressed birthright, blah blah blah. But it was that first answer that stuck with Weeden:

I'm making sure everything is in its place.

And what are we to do now, Howard? Now that you're gone, who will make sure it all holds together?

And Weeden has seen the end coming, though at the time he refused to admit it to himself. It was that fall of '36, and Howard was coming around less and less often. When he did it was obvious that something was wrong. His endurance was slipping, for one thing. He came back from a jaunt to Neutaconkanut Hill in Johnston positively winded. Yet he kept walking. His appetite, usually so robust, was off, too. Indigestion, he said primly, putting a hand to his belly. Weeden offered him a bicarbonate of soda, but Howard politely declined. Another cup of your excellent coffee, Buster, five sugars, please.

And he kept walking.

Yet when the end came, Buster didn't even know about it. It was at the tail-end of winter, '37, a season Howard hated anyway, so Buster wasn't even looking for him. It had been weeks—months?—since he'd come in, and in stray moments Weeden hoped he was all right.

Then he opened up the *Journal* one day in March and there it was: Local Writer Dead at 46. Cancer, it said. Hell of a way to go. Eaten alive, and all the time Howard thought it was just indigestion. It made Weeden sad in a slow, undefined way. He couldn't really say he was Howard's friend—could he? Certainly not as close as some of the correspondents Howard used to speak so warmly of in Texas or Wisconsin or God-knew-where-else.

Still, the news punched a hole in Weeden's life. He caught himself looking up the street nights, expecting that swift-legged scarecrow to appear. For him the loss of Howard Lovecraft was like a spoke missing from a great wheel: Every now and then it came back around and you wondered how the damned thing could keep turning without it.

Sorry?

Weeden swings from the grill where he had been cooking someone—*someone*—a hamburger. Who asked for the burger? And who was just talking to me? He looks to the counter. Now there are four customers. A middle-aged woman in a black summer-dress is sitting between Mr. Arnold and the bum. A little closer to the banker. Did she order it?

I said, wind's picking up.

It's the hand from the *Annawan*. He's sitting all the way to the right where he can look out the side window at the harbor. Then Weeden hears it—a wind like a moan of pain. It makes the small hairs on the back of his neck bristle.

Sounds like it, Weeden says, and goes back to his burger. The hand shifts on his stool as if he's sitting on a hot-plate.

It's like them rats, he says, d'joo see them rats?

No, Weeden says (the rats, the rats in the walls, Howard whispers to him).

All them rats leavin' the waterfront, says the hand, headed inland, uphill. He is wringing his cap between his hands. When I come over earlier, I seen them rats. Damnedest thing.

Sir, says Mr. Arnold, motioning toward the woman.

Beg pardon, ma'am, says the hand. And suddenly he's up, off the stool as if flung off. Gotta scram, he says, scattering coins across the counter and turning to run out the door. Chief'll want me to batten down the tub. All of youse oughta think about leavin', too. The last thing they hear of him is the one word: *Bad*.

The door slaps shut. Weeden stares at where the sailor had been a second before. The banker pushes the scattered coins into neat piles which

Weeden sweeps off into his apron with his hand. The bum watches, fascinated.

What about my hamburger, young man? It's the lady in the black dress—so that's who ordered the burger. Weeden scoops the burger off the grill with his spatula, drops it onto an open bun on a plate (guess I set that up, but damned if I can remember it). Slides the plate, bun and all, across to the lady. It's then he notices it's getting dark. What time is it, anyway, six? No, the clock over the Coldspot reads 3:40. Rain hits the window like bird-shot.

I think I should be getting back, says Mr. Arnold. He pulls his billfold from an inner jacket pocket and selects a new one-dollar greenback to lay upon the counter. When Weeden turns to the register to get him change, Arnold holds up his hand. That's fine, Buster, thank you, Buster, goodbye.

The lady pats her mouth with a napkin and gets up, too. The burger is half-eaten upon the plate, a crescent moon of bread. Don't you want—? starts Weeden.

Thank you, no, young man, it was very good. She turns to Mr. Arnold. If you'd be so kind...

I'd be delighted, and they go out the door arm in arm. Wind howls into the diner when they get the door open. Mr. Arnold grips the door and it yaws wide and almost throws him. Both his and the lady's hats vanish off their heads. Slowly Mr. Arnold pushes the door to until it latches. Then the pair of them huddle into each other and shuffle down South Water Street in the direction of downtown. Rain lashes them like whips and their coats slap about them like black wings.

Whatcha gonna do with that?

It's the bum and he's pointing an alcohol-palsied finger at the half-eaten burger.

Help yourself. Weeden watches the 'bo eat the burger. Takes all of five seconds. Weeden looks down at the lady's napkin where a perfect lipstick smile puckers up at him.

The gale swells. It muscles the little building around, creaking and cracking. But the E-Z is solid on its blocks and pilings, right?

Right?

While Buster busies himself at his cleaning the tramp pages through the *Journal* Weeden bought. The two men trade comments—Where you from?

Rochester, New York, says the 'bo, but pronounces it like RAH-chister, NerYerk. Know a good place to get a haircut?

Weeden grins at the stove-top. Yeah, he says, and a bath, too. That shuts him up.

Rain slaps sheets against the walls. Maybe I should close early, Weeden thinks. Give Mabel a jingle, see if she wants to take in a show at the RKO Albee. A look out the harborside window shows the water's up, but it's getting on toward high tide anyway. Even Buster the landlubber knows that. But the water has an ugly cast to it, a weird, pale, milky green color Weeden has never seen before. The wind tears it into strips of foam and spume. Good day to stay inside, he thinks. On the South Water Street side out through the door and front plate windows, rainwater pours down the alleys connecting to South Main and the vertical slopes of College Hill beyond. The wind is constant now. Its moaning rises and falls like a madman's keening.

It gets darker.

Weeden snaps on the diner's lights and stands by the door a minute, watching the freshets galloping down the alleys. Checks the clock—4:15.

Walking back around the counter, he says to the bum, You want anything?

The 'bo slowly reaches back and down toward a non-existent wallet, but Weeden stops him. No, on the house. The bum smiles, sunrise through the undergrowth of his whiskers.

Why sure, pal, he says. You're all right.

Weeden goes to the Coldspot and takes out two eggs and a butcher-paper full of bacon. He lays four strips of bacon out on the grill in careful, parallel lines,

(the rain hammers the walls)

cracks the eggs with one hand and drops the liquid onto the hot metal,

(the wind bellows destruction)

tosses the eggshells into the trash, and fiddles with the cooking meat.

All at once there is a metal screech from overhead and a gang of boys playing kick-the-can across the roof. Turns out it's the stove's metal flue, now sailing north toward Woonsocket at seventy miles an hour. Within seconds a stream of rainwater pours out of the hood over the grill. It hits the hot, greasy stove and explodes into a cloud of steam shot with grease spatters. The bum barks something he probably wouldn't have said if the lady were still there, and Weeden jerks back hard against the counter, covering his face with his apron. He darts a hand under the steam and turns off the gas feeding the grill. Rainwater continues to stream in—steam billows up to the ceiling.

Well, Weeden says with a lopsided grin, dinner's off. The bum licks his flaking lips, stares at the ruins of bacon and eggs floating in a pool of oily water. Just then the E-Z Lunch gives a shrug like a fat man shifting in his sleep and the bum is up, tipping his fedora and saying, So long, pal, and he trots to the door.

Weeden says, Where you gonna go? Look at it out there.

The bum hesitates with his hand on the doorknob. Looks out at the streets running water; looks at the diner full of steam.

Somewhere else, he says, and yanks the door open. Wind yells in triumph and tears the door out of the bum's hand. The door slams into the front wall of the E-Z Lunch and cracks the left-hand plate window. Weeden runs to pull the door shut. The 'bo, hat clamped to his head with one hand, is hunched shuffling through the ankle-deep water up (where else?) South Water Street like an enormous beetle pushed on by the gale. The water is almost up to the top of the diner's front step, and in the time that it takes Weeden to manhandle the door shut the water rises over the step and fans out across the diner's floor.

Buster stares out the windows, panting. Licks a rill of rainwater out of the corner of his mouth. Outside the world he knows is disappearing. The flying wrack is so thick he can barely see the brick warehouses across the street. Beyond them College Hill is just a dream Howard Lovecraft once had—gone. As Weeden stands there the little diner gives another heave

and shifts three feet to the left. Weeden can't know that exactly, of course, but damned if he didn't feel it. He remembers the deckhand's parting word—*Bad*. *Bad*, my foot, he thinks, this is terrible. His feet turn cold and he looks down to see the water has covered the entire floor and is inching up his shoes. Releasing the door (his hand has gone numb), he backs away from it to the middle of the room.

He stands there alone.

Thinks, I should get the mop, push this wet out of here. Then thinks, You idiot, the street's full of water. He sloshes to the harborside window, water to his ankles, looks out at a scene he does not recognize. The downtown side of the river is gone behind rain and spray; the harbor itself littered with junk, boards, crates, a life-preserver, a dead dog, a rocking chair. It all races up the current toward the bridges, downtown. And Weeden realizes with a shock that the water in the street outside—the water that is filling his precious little restaurant—isn't rainwater. It's Narragansett Bay.

For a full minute he stands frozen at the window. What do I do—*what do I do?* Through the roar of the wind he hears wood crackling, glass bursting. A wall of bricks falls out of nowhere to splash thunderously into the rising water and dash spray onto the window in front of Weeden's face.

That breaks the spell. In three slogging strides he is at the cash register. Punches SALE and the drawer shoots open with a musical *ding*. Ones, fives, tens (not too many of those), a handful of quarters. Leave the small change for the storm. Stuffs the dough in his pocket. He rounds the counter one last time, pushing through the knee-high water toward the front door—and stops. Looks around. I can't leave, he thinks. I built this place, for Pete's sake. Put ten years of my life into it. I'll be God-damned if I let a rainstorm drive me out. *Dumb, pig-headed Yankee*, says a voice in his head. *You stay here, you'll die*.

But he does stay. He backs up to the counter, heaves himself up to sit on it, sopping feet resting on one of the stools. It's high tide, he tells himself, that's all it is. A lot higher'n usual, but just high tide. It'll crest soon, then drop, same as always. He twists around to look at the white idiot

face of the clock—5:05. Won't be long now. Claps his hands once, twice. Shifts his feet on the stool. Not long now. The wind screams.

At 5:15 the lights go out. Weeden cranes around to stare at the clock in the gloom in the little diner where it will be 5:15 forever. The water now laps at the red vinyl seats of the stools; the coat-tree, buoyed up by the water, nods drunkenly and falls with a splash, taking Weeden's hat and coat with it. He is staring stupidly at the weird little circular boat his hat has become when the harborside window explodes inward and glass and rain spray everywhere and that same voice in his head is loud now and it says GO.

Weeden shoves himself off the counter, plunges feet first into the flood. Up to his groin now, rising as fast as you could run water from a spigot into a glass. Harder to slog through. Harder, too, to get that damned door open, but here for once the wind helps him and he's dragged out into the storm with the door.

Outside there is nothing but storm. The gale—a full hurricane now—rampages over the earth, races and roars in its mad circle as if it never had to stop. It scours the planet like a rasp, tearing up anything and everything and hurling it all through the air like some insane giant child in a tantrum. It has cut the world loose from its moorings and sent it spinning.

The wind shoves Weeden down into the salty water. He pushes himself back up into a crouch, but he can't think, can barely see. The gale tears his shirt away like a magic trick—presto, now you see it, now you don't. The air is so thick with spray it is neither air nor water, both, and riven with flying shingles and shirts and glass like crazy chimes down the wind and a sign that reads *E-Z LUNCH Quality Meals at Old-Fashioned Prices*. Squinting into the blast, Weeden thinks, Maybe make it up to South Main, up the Hill to high ground. Somewhere under the green water his legs start working slowly, painfully. A piece of something metal—rain gutter? hubcap?—slashes down the wind and opens up a gash across his shoulders. He pushes on.

And then he gets one of those idiotic little ideas that won't let men sleep at night and send them off on tangents they can't imagine:

Did I shut the door?

It's stupid, trivial, what will it matter? But it won't let him go. It's only a few steps back—better make sure. So he turns and gropes back and the Bay water bullies him downstream and the storm flings leaves and newspapers and pillows and flagpoles overhead. Weeden reels to the door—which is open. Knucklehead. He grips the edge and tries to push it shut, but it's like pushing a bag of wet sand.

It is then that he hears it. Different people will later describe it in different ways—a waterfall, a locomotive, a boiler-factory—but to Buster Weeden it sounds like God taking a deep breath before delivering the loudest, yellingest lecture in the universe. He looks up.

Towering over him, over the E-Z Lunch like a monument, is the bow of the *Annawan*. Weeden barely registers the vast, green wall of water it is riding as the 200-foot side-wheeler heaves up—and down. It hits the E-Z Lunch and folds it up like wet cardboard. The next second everything disappears.

He is pinwheeling through salt water. At the very last second he gulped air and shut his eyes. Now he opens them, but all he sees is that sickish green of roiling water boiling with swarms of bubbles. The water is cold and the bubbles would tickle his bare skin, but Weeden feels nothing. He is in shock from the impact of the tidal wave. A blessing, really. For several moments he has no idea where he is and doesn't even care. The hurricane has shoved the waters of Narragansett Bay up the Providence River as if into a funnel. Later records will show that the wave swelled the river thirteen feet above mean water. Which puts Buster Weeden about five feet under the surface at this moment. But he still has no idea where he is, and with returning consciousness comes the panic understanding that *he does not even know which way is up*. He thrusts arms and legs in all directions, reaching for solid ground, air, blessed air. He kicks out (one shoe is gone, he won't even know it until he steps on dry ground much later) and by a miracle drives his head above the flood. Nothing but that flying soup of atomized spray, but he manages to gasp in several lungfuls. A glance down College Street to where Canal Street ought to be shows a flotilla of

refrigerators sailing by, bobbing like giant cakes of soap on the tide. A man sits on the foremost, wet, disheveled, aghast. (Say, buddy, show you how to sail that thing? I'm no good at catboats, but I'm aces with a Coldspot.)

Under again. Weeden is being carried up South Main Street past the new Court House, the What Cheer Building, the Rhode Island School of Design. Weeden blinks into the murk ahead of him—lights. Pairs of lights. Headlights, he thinks. An underwater funeral cortège of cars caught in the flood. And a noise:

aaanh

The floodwaters have shorted the cars' circuits and their horns blare endlessly. Closer now, and the dark bulks of the cars resolve themselves. The first one's a Chevrolet—see the long-cross symbol on the grill?—the second a Dodge. The third car Weeden can't identify because he's looking at the man's face and hands pressed against the driver's side window, eyes staring in horror at his own drowning. In the back of the car a little pair of chubby legs and the hem of a frilly dress dangle from up under the roof. Weeden doesn't look any more.

Up again and there's the First Baptist Church, Finest Georgian Steeple in America, as Howard used to say (shut *up*, Howard, can't you see I'm drowning?). But the light is wrong. The normally bone-white steeple is now a black knife against the flying wrack. And the business blocks along South Main rise black and sheer as cliffs—no windows, no doors. Other structures hump up the hill like outgrowths of stone. Where is the Art Club, where the old mansions? All is strange and Weeden feels a dizziness of strangeness come over him. Like the E-Z Lunch, everything feels knocked three feet to the left.

Down he goes again, his head still spinning. Torrents of rain gush down what should have been Waterman and Thomas Streets to feed the flood. The currents become confused, angry, grab at Weeden, buffet him, tug him and twist him in several directions at once. He knows that he is near where the Moshassuck and Woonasquatucket Rivers join to make the Providence River. The city long ago filled in the Cove (remember the Cove, his grandmother would say, wistful smile, remember the Promenade?) and

buried the rivers under Memorial Square. If Weeden gets sucked into the Moshassuck's stone canal he'll be dragged into the tunnels under the Square and drowned for sure.

When he breaks the surface again he's sure he is in the canal. He's pressed against dressed stone by the current. No, not the canal, this stone stands up out of the water. The railroad viaduct over North Main? He pushes away from the stone to get a better look up—and up. It's a stone tower, a rough triangle a hundred feet high—*on North Main?* It is slick and black with slime and festooned (thank you, Howard) with seaweed. The blocks that make it up are not cut square but at every angle imaginable. Weeden can see no cement between them—how do they even hold together? Looking around him through the dimness he sees other, similar towers standing up out of the waters. They loom and fade and loom and fade as squalls blow past them. They lean and droop as if tired out by the weight of a thousand years—a million? There is nothing of Providence in sight, not the First Baptist, not the Court House, not the river. Nothing. A cold not from the water sinks through Weeden's body. Where *am* I? He feels the water beneath him drop into unfathomed nothingness—*black seas of infinity*. Got that one right, Howard. Did he know this place? Did he fear it? Weeden digs his fingers into the seam between two stone blocks and holds on, shivering. Waves slap him into the hard stone but he holds on, dear God, holds on.

Finally a wave larger than the rest comes along and sweeps Weeden off the strange tower. He scrabbles wildly at it, but the wave bears him away.

And under. Currents whirl him and toss him and his air is running out, his chest locked tight with bands of pressure and panic. Once again he is in that terrifying non-world of vertigo in which there is no up nor down, only the sickly gray-green of turbid waters, at one and the same time infused with light yet plummeting in all directions into roaring darkness. It is then that Something grabs Weeden's arm. It coils around his wrist and forearm with terrible strength, undeniable, insistent, and he immediately thinks of Lovecraft's tentacled creations. He puts his other hand to it to tear it away—no, not a tentacle. Hard—the chitinous segmented arm of some

arthropod horror. Weeden's fingers discover fingers—strong, thin fingers gripping his wrist and pulling him up and up, up toward a paler darkness, up toward the white oval of a face, a long lantern-jawed coffin of a face, and two eyes like black stones of rare fire...

When Weeden finally claws to the surface again it is in the Providence he knows. He gapes at the old familiar buildings as greedily as he gasps in air, thank God thank God thank God. *Thank you, Howard.* The pale face, the face he knew so well from midnight chats over endless gallons of coffee, is gone. And the hand that pulled him from drowning is a long scarf of fisherman's net, the other end caught around a lamppost. The storm still rages, but the wave has crested. Now, he thinks, it will start withdrawing, dragging all with it back to sea. Got to get a-holt of something, get out. With the water poised in equilibrium between flood and ebb, Weeden disentangles his arm from the net and swims as hard as he can toward the side of the street. Grabs hold of a railing and hauls himself up and out of the greedy waters. Crawls hand over bleeding hand up a cobblestone lane—South Court Street, there's the Old State House, wouldn't Lovecraft be delighted? Weeden is shaking with cold, exhaustion, pain. The salt water has gotten into the cut on his back and set it afire. But he is alive, thank God, and pulls onward ten, twenty feet up from the terrible waters, to the side of this building, that's enough, and collapses.

* * *

When he wakes up it is to a darkness Providence has not known for three centuries. Here and there windows flicker with the unsteady yellow glow of candles. Above downtown, blue-white shafts of anti-aircraft spotlights probe the torn skies. Weeden pushes himself up off the pavement, stumbles back down to North Main. The flood is gone, most of the wind, too. But the stately old trees of College Hill are stripped down to mere sticks and Weeden hugs himself against a new chill. It is suddenly, brutally, autumn.

He turns left on North Main, right on Steeple. Glass crunches underfoot with every step. It is then that Weeden discovers he has lost his

left shoe. Finds another, two sizes too big, but he straps it onto his foot with a strip of wet bedding. The flood has left all its broken toys behind. Weeden steps around bricks and lumber and chunks of concrete; over cornices and banisters, gas-cans, books, a Victrola, a body; past cars and boats and bait shacks. A wing-chair full of dead fish. Here's Memorial Square and its granite monument. Was this what I saw in the flood? he wonders. But he knows it is not. The city looks like something out of a war movie. And it *was* a war, wasn't it? What on earth—if of earth—hit us?

A radio sitting on the square and plugged into nothing plays on. A man is speaking reasonably, says, Sorry, Mister, you can't go downtown. Weeden looks up. A Guardsman appears out of the gloom, bayoneted rifle in one hand, blanket in the other. Off limits, he says. Martial law. Here, have a blanket. Weeden takes the blanket. It's damp but still dryer than he is and he wraps it tightly around himself.

The Guardsman vanishes—Weeden walks on. It is so very quiet but for a few last shreds of wind up among the black towers of Exchange Place. Here's a boat, the *Lochinvar* out of Portsmouth. A car folded in half by a falling chimney—bricks everywhere. Glass everywhere. And everything's wet. What he wouldn't give for a hot cup of coffee and a dry couch to lie down on. But not now. Sometime he'll go down and see what's left of the E-Z, too—but not now. Now he wanders. He sees the Market House, built 1773, windows blown out but still standing. And looming behind it, white as ever, the First Baptist's stubborn Yankee steeple. A spotlight glances off the Industrial Trust Building, flashing into startled existence—good. Still there. He walks on. Up the Hill stand the Athenaeum, the Unitarian Church, John Brown House, the Christian Science dome. If he starts walking now he can see them all before daylight.

In Bloom

LYNNE JAMNECK

Lynne Jamneck is a fiction writer and editor. She holds an M.A. in English Literature from Auckland University, New Zealand. Her fiction has appeared in Fantastique Unfettered, H. P. Lovecraft's Magazine of Horror, Jabberwocky, Weird Fiction Review, Tales from the Bell Club, Something Wicked, and Tales for Canterbury. She edited the Lambda Award–shortlisted SF anthology Periphery and has published nonfiction for, among others, Weird Tales, Strange Horizons, The Lovecraft Annual, and Fantasy Magazine. She has edited Dreams from the Witch House: Female Voices of Lovecraftian Horror (Dark Regions Press, 2015) and, with S. T. Joshi, Gothic Lovecraft (Cycatrix Press, 2016).



SIT UP WITH A START. I DON'T REMEMBER DREAMING and it's early morning quiet. But though something feels different, nothing seems out of place. The phone's screen glares brightly. Awake before the alarm, the chance to get up before the cat commences his ritualistic clawing of the bed. But I remain still. The slightest change could set off an avalanche. *No*. That's just paranoia from a long suffering anxiety disorder. I realise I had forgotten to take my medication the day before.

I roll onto my stomach, get out of bed awkwardly, and stumble into the shower. Languishing under hot water and keeping time to avoid feeling it grow cold. So far, so good.

Get out, get a towel. A fresh one. Begin drying my back. That's when I feel it.

I experience a fleeting sense of *déjà vu*: I'm back in bed, convincing myself to stay there. Then disconnect from the odd sensation as the towel brushes across something—*some things*— followed by a disconcerting instant between reaching for an explanation and what the usually quiet part of my brain already knows: the explanation is something you don't want to hear.

Nonsensical is what I see in the mirror. Find another, bigger mirror and hold it up for a better view. Look closely and see raised bumps below pale skin on both sides of the spine. Maybe seven (one is where Karen had whacked me with her squash racquet?).

Hospital or doctor?

Doctor would be a good approach. Stem the rising tide of panic. Reasoning: if he or she suggests I go to a hospital it would allow me—only then—to infer that the situation is serious. Never mind goddamned *strange*.

But I'd still be able to decide: take a left turn and accept medical advice or turn right, go home and lock the front door. See what transpires.

The doctor looks, shakes his head, and refers me to hospital. I go home and lock the door.

I sit on the couch. For most of the afternoon and at a forward lean that hurts my back. Stare at the television. Go to the bathroom and get undressed. Look in the mirror. Still the same. Get in the shower again. I expect the bumps to hurt, maybe even burn, but even when I turn the hot water up full bore I feel only a pleasant and gentle tingling. Dry myself, but not my back. Sit naked on the bed with a breeze blowing in the window.

The phone rings. It's Terry.

"Ella?"

Terry never calls me at home. "Is this about the bumps on my back?" On the other end of the line, Terry clears his throat.

I get in the car and drive the ten miles to the lab.

Terry wears latex gloves and a mask. "All right, let's have a look."

Justine and Adam watch, but not because I am unbuttoning my shirt. We have all seen one another naked, some of us in more intimate circumstances than others. We have decontamination showers together often, most recently following the twelve days spent on the Kerguelen Islands, sifting through spore samples.

Adam makes small talk. Terry takes a sample. A small sting when the scalpel cuts. Justine looks concerned. *Too little too late.*

Terry looks up from his microscope, face blank. "I don't know."

Am I scared? In fact, I feel somewhat entranced. Perhaps the organism is plying me with positive neurotransmitters.

They won't let me leave the lab. *It would be irresponsible, Ella.* I agree.

Decontamination showers for the three of them and a vacuum-sealed room for me. Justine comes. It takes me a moment to be sure because she's wearing a full hazmat suit, all of her protected against me. "I'm sorry this happened to you."

How to react? A shrug. "They're growing fast. I can feel them."

The bumps are already sporting small stalks and cotyledons.

“Do they hurt?”

“Actually, it’s quite pleasant.”

“Are you scared?”

My back turned to her, I sense Justine’s hesitation. Had she recognised those months ago that there was something in me that would attract alien plants?

Three days pass; the plants grow quickly. Terry makes me take too many decon showers. I tell him he’ll damage them.

Day four: Terry manages to manoeuvre me just so and waits outside the room as the X-ray machine *clack-clacks* through its sequence. Will the radiation kill my leaves? They are big enough now so that when I lie on my stomach on the small bed, I can feel the breeze from the fan on the wall moving them, their roots retorting beneath my skin.

The X-rays show what we all suspect. The roots are growing into my organs. Bizarrely, however, no negative side effects.

Adam doesn’t hide his enthusiasm as a result of what he’s privy to, but it unsettles Justine. Terry approaches it like everything else: observe it. Study it.

It only takes a week for me to grow tired of being treated like a specimen. The lab is small. There are walls and fluorescents everywhere. Terry and Adam: “It will be better to wait things out, observe, write a report.”

On Thursday night, when Terry finds himself hungry enough to leave the lab for dinner and Adam and Justine are engrossed in studying cuttings from my forearms, I escape. Terry never thought to restrict me because he expects I realise the importance of isolation. Well, your priorities change when you start morphing into another life form.

Of course, I can’t go home. It’s the first place they would look for me. Justine still has a key. Not that it really matters.

I experience an intense and constricting nausea at the notion of more walls and feel the same walking along the road, beneath the streetlights and sitting at a bus stop for no particular reason. I end up at the park, which is dangerous, but no recognisable part of me seems to care. It is the

most singularly comforting sensation when I lie down on the damp-ridden grass, flat on my stomach.

I wake in the morning at first light, smile to myself, and try to move. Something is holding me down—a disturbing tug that feels like a needle pulling hemp string through the gaps between my ribs. My new roots have grown into the soil.

This won't work. I pull harder and *snap-snap-crack* and fortunately the pain is minimal because I'd only been on the grass a few hours. It hurts me more to look down and see the munted little roots flopping sadly from where they poke out of my chest.

When I was six, my mother told me that if I swallowed watermelon seeds they would grow inside me from the inside out. Turns out she was right, only she had the wrong kind of seed.

I need clothes, so I risk going home. I'm quick and have barely left the building when I see Terry's headlights draw up to my front door. I pull my three-quarter coat close and walk-trot to the library, hearing the leaves trail behind me. Science or folklore? Cryptobotany? Mythology?

Start logical, see where it goes.

THE KERGEULEN ISLANDS

a.k.a. 'the Desolation Islands'

GEOGRAPHY

A group of islands in the southern Indian Ocean... part of French Southern and Antarctic Lands... no indigenous inhabitants... discovered by Breton-French navigator Yves-Joseph de Kerguelen-Trémarec, 12 February 1772 ...occupied since 1950 by scientific research teams... climate is oceanic, cold and extremely windswept... mountains frequently covered in snow but can thaw very quickly in rain—

It had rained endlessly during our stay on the islands while we chipped at the ice and shovelled the ground. I recall snow slush and melting mud.

...islands are part of Southern Indian Ocean Islands tundra ecoregion... plant life primarily limited to grasses, mosses, and lichens... In 1999, drilling by the JOIDES Resolution research vessel in the Indian Ocean discovered evidence that a large island, the Kerguelen Plateau, had been submerged about 20 million years ago by rising sea levels. Samples showed pollen and fragments of wood in 90-million-year-old sediment...

GEOLOGY

. . . part of the submerged Kerguelen Plateau created by volcanic eruptions... now lies on the Antarctic plate... lignite strata, trapped in basalt flows, have revealed fossilised fragments from theorised impact crater, likely seed pods of unknown origins dated at roughly 17 million years of age.

A dense pressure starts building in my head. When breathing I smell an odour like decaying flesh interspersed with the familiar fresh-cut aroma of chlorophyll. Dark green foliage has begun to sliver out from beneath the cuffs of my shirt. When I turn from the reading table the heavy blanket of leaves on my back moves like a slowly rolling wave. The fluorescent lights are beginning to anger me.

Barely outside the giant glass building, I pull off the coat and leave it where it falls onto the concrete, flat, as if someone had simply vanished from it. My fingers move beneath the creeping foliage like short, fat worms. I no longer feel my heart beating.

While daylight blazes I hide near the river, taking shelter below the jetty. When night falls I head back to the park.

I choose a carefully placed spot. Right above me, the moon.

A few feet away there is a bench, the kind I would have sat on myself had I taken more time to visit the park. The night is beautiful; so much

more than the fake light and the walls I had chosen to surround myself with before.

I am growing fast now. Curled like a cat on the soft, moist lawn I can hear myself take root. Tomorrow I will be deeply grounded. When the sun rises and the park's caretakers find me and touch my fine-looking flowers with their star-blue leaves, they too will have their human husks rent bare by proliferating beauty. Together we will all bloom into an emerald sea to once again, as we have done many times before, reclaim what has been taken from us.

The Black Abbess

JOHN REPPION

John Reppion's day job is scripting comics with his wife Leah Moore, including titles such as The Complete Dracula and The Trial of Sherlock Holmes. His fascination with folklore, myth, and customs has led to articles for such venues as Fortean Times and The Daily Grail online. His prose fiction can be found in SteamPunk Magazine and the anthology Cthulhu Lives! (Ghostwood Books, 2014). Sometimes he deals in fact, sometimes in fiction, and sometimes he gets confused.

“N THE DARK, DAMP NORTHWEST OF ENGLAND, halfway between the one-time Viking outpost of Liverpool and former Roman stronghold Manchester, lies Greenwood. Taking its name from the largest of a handful of communities established amid the wolf-haunted forests of Mercia, today's Greenwood is a collection of descendant villages and parishes whose complex boundary line hints at a kinship more arcane than that of mere geography. Modern roads now connect Pikelow, Stone Cross, Much Wulfston, Little Wulfston, Camp Hill, and Greenwood village, but the region is also webbed with an intricate network of narrow, ivy-lined footpaths. Many of these ancient byways have colourful names such as Corpseway, Hobb's Ginnel, Dungeon Lane, Screaming Boy's Snicket, and so on. Some remain in daily use while others are shunned; left to the bramble and the beasts.”

“What's that?” asked Jim, only half listening as he squinted out at the slate-grey rain that threatened to obscure his view of the road ahead.

“I just picked it up in the gas station back there. Oh, I filled up the jerry-can too. It's called *History and Folklore of Greenwood*; they had a whole shelf of them. How cool is that?”

Jim glanced over at the yellowed booklet in his passenger's tattoo-covered hands. “Cool. It looks old.”

Aaron didn't reply: he was too busy flipping through the flimsy pages, searching. The belaboured squeak and thump of the camper-van's windscreen-wipers, louder than the engine as it was, served instead of silence until he found what he was looking for.

“And here we are,” he announced at last, toothy grin spreading so wide it lifted his thick-rimmed glasses half an inch. “The Black Abbess’!”

The name had come from Aaron, garnered from one of the many Old Country legends his grandmother had told him when he was a child. He and Jim had met two years earlier in Burlington, New England. Jim was at the University of Vermont studying American history, while Aaron worked in a local coffee shop that doubled as a small-scale music venue. Between the jazz trios, folk duos, and earnest acoustic-wielding singer-songwriters that made up the majority of Caffeine 15's entertainment, Aaron would occasionally perform himself. Seated on a beaten-up amplifier, an array of foot-switch effects before him, Aaron layered and looped guitar sounds one on top of another with a well-timed tap of his street-blackend Converse. The result was a set that began as sparse ambience and evolved gradually into a mesmeric droning symphony.

Jim, the older of the two by a couple of years, had heard these eerie emanations as he passed Caffeine 15 on his way home one evening and called in to see who was playing. He had been amazed to find Aaron alone on the tiny corner stage, waves of sound rolling from the tattered amp he was perched upon. Jim played drums in a death metal band called Coffin Womb at the time but was growing tired of monotonous blast-beat exertions as well as of lugging a six-piece band's worth of equipment around—a task that, as a van owner, seemed to fall to him more often than not. He had begun dreaming of stripping his kit down to bare essentials, playing minimally, slowly, and hypnotically. The pair chatted after Aaron's performance and throughout his evening-shift behind the counter. In the early hours of the next morning, after locking Caffeine 15's door, they headed over to Coffin Womb's rehearsal space together. The music the duo made came out more complex than Jim had envisaged, heavier than Aaron had played before; Psychedoomia, they half-jokingly agreed to call it. They played their first handful of live shows under the name until each admitted to the other that they found it slightly embarrassing. Most of their songs, wordless as they were, had no titles, but "The Black Abbess" had been one of Aaron's solo pieces they'd adapted as a duo. The name seemed to fit the atmosphere they conjured together.

“Besides,” Jim had said as he wiped post-gig IPA froth from his beard one evening, “it’ll look good on a T-shirt.”

Jim was wearing one of the shirts he’d designed and screen-printed back in Burlington all those months earlier as he piloted the rust-scabbed Dormobile through the British rain. The material now faded to grey, parts of the lettering and skeletal nun design cracked and worn away. Aaron pushed his glasses back up his nose with a sigil-inscribed index finger. Clearing his throat with mock-theatricality, he proceeded to read aloud from the booklet in his best English accent.

“While some of Hillfoot Abbey’s surviving pre-Victorian structure dates from mediaeval times, there are elements which suggest that a place of worship stood upon that same site since the fifth century, and perhaps earlier still. The most obvious evidences are the Saxon-carved stones in the west wall of the porch and those preserved outside the church itself in a cloister whose exact origins remain unknown. A group of nuns chronicled only as The Black Order lived and worshipped there from an unrecorded time up to 1537. Of the few historians who have taken an interest, the majority have assumed that ‘The Black Order’ referred to the Order of Saint Benedict, though that is unproven.” Here Aaron, very much in character, wagged an index finger reproachfully. Jim, sensing the need, managed a grunt of vague amusement, but his attention remained focussed on the road ahead.

“It is unclear,” Aaron continued, taking the hint and dropping the accent, “precisely why Hillfoot Abbey escaped survey in the *Valor Ecclesiasticus*, though it is perhaps worth mentioning that some claim agents of the King did visit at that time but were persuaded, one way or another, not to report on what they found. Nevertheless, 1537 remains the only date when we have written proof of Henry’s ‘visitors’ calling upon the Black Abbess and her Sisters. Though the Act of Parliament under which the Visitor-General’s men were acting stated that “*manifest sin, vicious, carnal, and abominable living is daily used and committed among the little and small abbeys, priories, and other religious houses of monks, canons, and nuns,*” they were nevertheless unprepared for what they saw at Hillfoot Abbey.

“The visitors had lost their way upon the thorny byways of Greenwood, and the night had overtaken them before the Abbey was finally sighted; nestled in the shadow of Camp Hill and all but screened from view by the Briar Acre, just as it is today. The chapel windows were lit, yet when the men entered they found no persons within. A great many candles were burning, which was taken as evidence of the Sisters’ brazen wastefulness. Furthermore, they heard what they took to be the scurrying “of vermine” and noted that the stone floor was “*much befoul’d with fylth.*” The disgusted visitors called out for the nuns to come forth and answer for their slatternly ways, but their cries went unanswered. Twelve Sisters were eventually found in the unbarred dormitory, each sleeping so deeply that the King’s men were unable to wake them with shouts, shakes, or even slaps upon their cheeks. Beside each nun lay a cup drained of its contents, which, coupled with their insensible state, naturally added drunkenness to the list of charges the visitors were compiling against the order. The Abbess’s own chambers’...”

As Aaron fumbled to unpick the corner of the age-stuck page from that of its neighbour, Jim spotted the tip of a spire projecting above the muddle of treetops ahead. Seconds later a bulge in the landscape that looked through the rain as much like an earthbound cloud as it did a hill, reared up behind it.

“I think I see the Abbey!”

Aaron flapped the booklet onto the dashboard and lunged forward, straining against his seatbelt to squint ahead.

“Yeah, I think that’s it!”

Soon a rust-coloured road sign bearing an image of a spired church confirmed their suppositions, and Jim manoeuvred the van onto the narrow, single-lane road it pointed toward. The route snaked circuitously through silent and almost colourless woodland. The road was pitted and cracked; the achromatic trees, whose branches tapped and scraped at the Dormobile’s roof, had swelled their roots to burst through the tarmac where and when they could. The only evidence that any other vehicle had passed

that way recently was the tyre-burst corpse of an unfortunate badger, whose further desecration Jim had no time or space to avoid.

Neither man spoke, but Aaron eagerly drank in the eeriness of their surroundings. This was the cool, creepy England he had secretly hoped they would see when they arranged their modest tour of the country. Perhaps it was the fact that he was the one piloting the borrowed, aged, manual transmission, ice cream truck-like vehicle on the wrong side of the all too narrow road, but Jim was not so enamoured of his surroundings.

Presently they rattled over the hump of a small, ancient-looking bridge, next to which stood a squat plinth constructed from the same large stone blocks. A stone cross, dislodged who knows how long ago from its socket at the pedestal's centre, leaned drunkenly against a nearby tree. A web of ivy bound its base to the trunk, blurring the line between the cold grey stone of one and the cold grey bark of the other. Where water once flowed beneath the bridge there was now a bed of odorous black mud and a fine crop of tall, overnourished nettles. It seemed to Aaron as he peered out of the passenger-side window that their itchy leaves rippled like the scales of some great slumbering reptile as the rain beat heavily upon them. He smiled as he remembered his grandmother telling him of a serpent-dragon slain by a knight in blade-covered armour in waters of the River Wear.

The track made a final squirming turn and suddenly the trees were replaced by hedgerows. They were free of the woodland and at the foot of Camp Hill, above which the grey-black boiling sky was visible once more. The hedges bordered the gardens of two dozen or so Victorian terraced houses on either side of the road, which, though now wide enough for two vehicles to pass, had grown no less uneven. On the right the row of houses ended with a large castellated building with a wealth of high, arched windows. A painted sign bolted to the wall rattled in the rain as they approached. Its flaking lettering named the place The Hillfoot Inn. Opposite the pub was a semicircular gravel area that might have once been used for horse-drawn carriages and carts to turn around in but, according to a less artfully rendered sign propped there, now served as the establishment's car-park. Gravel scrunched beneath the camper-van's tyres

as Jim guided them into the lot and brought the grateful vehicle to a shuddering halt.

Struggling into the straps of his backpack, Aaron slithered his way round to the driver's side where Jim was already holding up his phone. His screen framed a picture of the Abbey, which seemed from the angle to be surrounded by a thorny thicket straight out of a fairy tale. Jim took a moment to flip through Instagram filters, typed the caption 'The Black Abbess at Hillfoot Abbey,' then touched the screen to post the shot to the Internet. Pulling their hoods up against the rain, the pair hurried their way up the road past thorn-snarled Briar Acre, left to grow wild far beyond the memory of the living. Once they were on the far side of the brambled plot they could see that the other sides of the abbey were guarded by a high stone wall, topped with rusted ornate railings. The entrance into the churchyard was protected by an arched stone porchway that they ducked into as quickly as they could. A large wooden gate filled the back wall of structure, blocking out the grey-toned sunlight. Jim brought out his phone again and lit up the screen as a makeshift torch. A filigreed iron handle and a cartoonish keyhole were the only features it illuminated. The handle would not turn. The door would not move.

"It's locked."

Jim flipped the phone round to peer at it, the screen underlighting his bearded countenance while Aaron made his own vain attempt at turning the handle.

"Damn, man. I don't want to just climb over the wall. What time is it?"

"Eleven-thirty," Jim replied, poking at his screen. "Leeds is only a couple hours' drive."

Aaron leant out into the rain again, peering to either side of the lychgate, then dodged back into the gloom.

"Okay, let's try the pub. Someone there must know the preacher or the groundskeeper, or something, right? We can get something to eat. Maybe the rain will even stop."

They broke cover and had started to jog back down the gentle slope when a sudden, sharp cry rang out. A tall, hooded figure stood next to the

Dormobile pointing a long bony finger towards them. It yelled again, but neither Jim nor Aaron could understand what was being said. They were within a hundred feet when the white-faced man dressed in a rain-slick waterproof shouted for a third time.

“You can’t stop here!”

Jim opened his mouth to speak as he crunched to a stop opposite the man but was cut off by yet another only slightly less roaring utterance.

“Hillfoot Inn parking!” The man swung his still pointing finger round to indicate the painted notice he was quoting without so much as glancing towards it. “This is for customers! It’s not a campsite!”

“We were just heading into the pub, actually,” Aaron found himself saying rather more loudly than he’d intended, as if he were addressing someone hard of hearing, or possibly slow of wits.

The pointer stood motionless, a scowl creasing his features. His small dark eyes stared unblinking into Aaron’s water-spattered lenses. Rain dripped from the end of his long nose, which protruded from the cover of his hood. Then, in one fluid motion, he dropped his arm to his side and took a sudden long step forward between the two men, muttering something unintelligible yet unmistakably unpleasant. Jim and Aaron turned to see the glistening figure storming across the road and into the pub, the door of which closed behind it with a muffled slam.

* * *

A bodyless fox, its teeth bared in a snarl so ferocious it seemed whoever slew the beast must have been brave indeed, glared down at Aaron. He stood at the bar, a laminated menu in his hands. Jim was already halfway into a nearby snug, a murderously tusked boar-head framed on his phone-screen.

“Do you want to take a look at the menu?”

“Just get me the usual. There are tables back here.” Jim disappeared round a corner, still viewing his surroundings via his phone. “Number thirteen’s right by the window.”

There was no sign of anyone behind the bar. The whole place seemed deserted, in fact. Aaron had been beginning to wonder what the English would do to gain someone's attention without causing offence when the inn's door was rammed open by a double-buggy. Its rain-cover was fogged as if, refusing to be thwarted by the plastic, a cloud had decided to form itself around the infants within. The woman wielding the pram like a weapon held the door open one-handed for her friend, who was rattling a pushchair containing a sodden yet snoring toddler close behind. High multi-strapped orthoses bound the sleeping child's legs and feet, evidently in a bid to correct or ease some medical condition. The women, each zipped up tightly in hooded coats, were talking loudly, seemingly unconcerned with waking their children. Aaron gave them a friendly smile as they drove their dripping carriages towards a back room.

"No one serving you, love?" the pushchair pusher enquired not unsympathetically as she paused to pull back her headgear, revealing a striking caprine face with large wide-set hazel eyes, a long flat nose, and a mouth that seemed far too narrow to contain all the teeth displayed in a sudden, friendly grin.

Aaron showed his palms and raised his eyebrows in the universally understood manner.

"Lucy! Customers!" the woman bellowed at the top of her voice, then trundled on with a satisfied nod.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," a voice behind him said, not entirely convincingly.

Aaron turned back to the counter, behind which a barmaid now stood. She was perhaps two years younger than him; her tied-back blacker-than-black hair with its ultra-precise fringe and shaven sides topped a pale, cherubic, eyebrowless face. Tiny puckered dimples below her lip, in the side of her nose, and along the outer edge of both ears signalled where a host of surgical steel hardware was set outside of working hours. The name tag pinned to her white blouse read LUCY. A smile spread across her thin lips as she reached out and took hold of his hand.

"I love this! What is it?"

After a what seemed like far too many awkward seconds of looking from his own hand to Lucy's smiling face and back, Aaron finally understood what he was being asked.

"Oh. Uh. So this one is supposed to be for protection from evil spirits, and this one on the back of the other hand is to attract good spirits. Then these are the Seven Sigils on my fingers. They're supposed to represent the *seven archangels that rule the seven heavens*. It's all from this sixteenth-century book called *The Discoverie of Witchcraft*."

"You're American!"

"Yeah," he laughed, self-consciously, "well, kind of half-English. My mom was born here, but they moved to the States when she was just a baby."

"And you've come to see the church?"

"How did you know that?"

"Well, I mean..." Lucy lifted up the hand she was still holding onto and showed it to him as if it belonged to someone else. "If you're interested in witches and all that. Besides, there's not much else round here worth seeing."

"I wouldn't say that," he thought, then cringed inwardly at the notion of speaking such a clichéd line.

Letting go of Aaron's hand, Lucy glanced around conspiratorially. Seemingly satisfied that no one but he and the leering fox head were watching, she began to unbutton her uniform at the neck. Aaron froze where he stood, not knowing what to do or say. Lucy peeled back the polyester and turned to display an intricate, spidery tattoo covering her right shoulder blade.

"Not as old as yours. It's from a picture by Arthur Rackham," she said, looking back over her shoulder with a toothy grin idiosyncratic enough to remind Aaron he was definitely not in America. "So what can I do for you?"

"Oh, right, yeah." Aaron shook his head slightly and passed a hand across his face as if to force composure upon himself. "One full English breakfast, please? And do you have a vegetarian breakfast?"

Lucy glanced up at an aged wooden cased clock that hung on the wall.

"You're cutting it a bit fine." She stepped over to an open doorway at the back of the bar. "Dad! Couple of breakfasts up here before you start on the lunches!"

A tall, aproned figure appeared all too abruptly in the doorway and Lucy started.

"Jesus, Dad!"

Although he was now free of his waterproofs, Aaron recognised the long nose and white face of the man he and Jim had encountered in the car-park. Lucy was hurriedly doing up the topmost of her blouse buttons and the man, her father, glared at this incredulously before turning his scowl towards Aaron.

"Couple of breakfasts, Dad," Lucy repeated. "And did you want drinks?"

"Yeah, two large Cokes, please," Aaron replied, unable to look away from the searing gaze of the landlord even as Lucy clinked ice into two pint glasses.

A high, bleating squeal came from a back room as one of the pram passengers found itself rudely awakened in unexpected surroundings. As if summoned by the cries, a trio of women with toddlers in tow pushed their way through the front door, bringing a flurry of rain with them. As they busied themselves unzipping coats and wiping noses, Lucy's father's stare finally flicked away from Aaron's. He muttered something under his breath and made a move as if to return to his kitchen.

"Excuse me," Aaron stuttered; the eyes were back upon him in an instant. "Sorry, could I have one vegetarian breakfast? One full English and one vegetarian. Please. Thank you. Sir."

Lucy stepped between the two men, blocking each's view of the other as she set two tall glasses of noisily effervescing cola down before Aaron.

"That's fifteen pound, please. What number table are you sitting at?"

* * *

Aaron and Jim were sharing their snug with another three damp parents and four restless pre-school children by the time Lucy had arrived with their breakfasts.

"Yours was the vegetarian, wasn't it?" she grinned as she set the plate down before Aaron.

"Actually, that's mine," replied Jim, switching the plates round and unwrapping his napkin-sheathed cutlery eagerly. "Thanks."

"Yeah, thanks," Aaron said. "Do you know if there's someone we could speak to about taking a look at the church? We only have a few hours really."

"You came to the right place at the right time then. All these kids will be heading over there after they've had their dinners. It's Stay and Play this afternoon—like a playgroup thing. Starts at one. It's Angela you need to speak to. She's the minister. She'll be happy to show you round, I'm sure."

"That's awesome. Thank you so much, Lucy."

"How did you—?" Puzzled for a second, she followed his gaze, looking down at the name tag pinned to her front. She grinned again and let out a squeaky though pleasant giggle. "Where are you off to then? I mean, you said you have to go?"

"Oh, we're playing a show in Leeds. We're musicians."

"You're in a band?"

"We're a duo," said Jim through a mouthful of greasy breakfast, his eyes never leaving his phone, which now sat next to his plate.

"Wow, that's—" A shout summoned her back to the bar before Lucy could find the words. "Sorry, I'd better get on."

Aaron gazed after her as she rushed off. "She's cute, huh?"

"Uh?" Jim looked up at his friend, then off in the direction of his eyes. "Oh. Didn't really look, to be honest, man. Hey, these mushrooms are beautiful! Didn't you get any?"

* * *

The lunch service was a busy and noisy one. Aaron and Lucy exchanged smiles whenever she passed carrying steaming plates dripping gravy, and later the remains thereof stacked together in clattering piles. The first of the child-wranglers began to leave just before one o'clock, and Aaron thought it best they follow the leaders to make sure they had as much time as possible.

The rain had calmed to a misty drizzle as they trudged their way back up the road towards the abbey. The gate, which had previously barred their passage, stood wide open, framing a view of the mossy pathway that led to a large, mediaeval-looking door in the building itself. With Jim's assistance, Aaron retrieved his camera from his rucksack and stepped backward across the road, squinting into its viewfinder. A blurry stream of walkers, prams, and wheelchairs obscured the perfect shot through the stone portal to the abbey beyond. A figure moving against the flow of bodies—a woman in her late fifties with hair gathered in a fat grey plait that swung from side to side as she hurried along—entered and soon filled the frame as she crossed headed towards him.

"Can I help you?" The question seemed genuine rather than confrontational, though it was obvious from her lack of coat that she had left the church specifically to find out what he was up to.

"Sorry, do I need permission to take photographs?"

"Not of the church, no. But the children. I mean, I'm afraid we can't be too careful these days."

"Sorry. I didn't think. Me and my friend"—Aaron gestured over at Jim, who stood with his back to the church wall obliviously thumbing his phone-screen—"we're over here from the US. We just wanted to take a look at the abbey and get a few pictures. Lucy over at the pub said we should speak to Angela. Is that you?"

"That's me." The minister grinned, showing teeth the colour of weak tea. "You're interested in our abbess then! Why didn't you say? Come in, come in!"

Logs blistered in the arcade fireplace of the vast church hall, the ornate hearth caged in a large iron fire-guard. Parents and caregivers were seating

themselves as close as they dared; drying steaming hats, coats, and mittens on the backs of rickety wooden chairs turned to bear the brunt of the heat. The noise of the children as they played—their stamping feet, their laughter, their cries—echoed around the high open-timbered hall. A timeless, dreamlike sound. It prickled the back of Jim's neck. Angela guided the pair past the hall's open interior doors, the rows of prams parked outside, and into a narrow vaulted corridor.

"This is nearly all Victorian. The hall too. They tried to make it all look very mediaeval, but it's a nineteenth-century idea of that. We are on the site of the abbey, of course, but there's very little left of it. The fire—" She stopped and turned to face them. "Do you know the story?"

"My mother's family came from not far from here. Culcheth. My grandma used to tell me all these old English legends: Springheeled Jack, the Lambton Wurm, the Voolas, Gytrash. The story of the abbess was always one of my favourites."

"Ah, you have a personal connection to us then." She glanced round toward Jim. "And what about you? Any English blood?"

The word hung in the air on fine threads of tinnitus-like reverberation. The prickling at the back of Jim's neck skittered up into his skull. A vertigo-like head-rush blurred his vision for a second. Somehow, despite the distance, he felt the heat of the church hall surge at his back.

"Way back. Sixteen hundreds." Jim coughed out his answer in self-conscious short bursts, struggling to regain his composure.

"But Jim's from the aristocracy," Aaron laughed. "They were Cromwells, right? The Maryland Cromwells." He smiled and nodded eagerly, trying to encourage his friend into some genealogical anecdote. Jim remained silent.

"A descendant of the Visitor-General himself, eh?" The minister's eyes narrowed as she peered at Jim in what he tried to reassure himself must be mock scrutiny.

He was suddenly moved to pull his hooded sweatshirt up over his head, exposing the well-worn T-shirt beneath with its wimpled skull and blacklettered legend. Completing the removal of the garment, Jim puffed

his cheeks and blew out air as if glad to be rid of the extra layer's warmth. The minister stared at the design, a politely quizzical half-smile on her face.

"That's us." Aaron laughed in what he hoped was a friendly and reassuring fashion, wondering why the hell Jim had decided to reveal his shirt in such an odd way. "We play music together. We're called The Black Abbess. We're on a tour at the moment."

"You're in a band?"

"A duo," Jim replied hurriedly, wiping sweat from his brow with the back of his hand. "That's what brought us here. We just thought it would be good to get a picture of us at the abbey."

"And we'd love to look around, of course," Aaron added hastily, shooting Jim a reproachful look that went wholly unacknowledged. "Hear some of the history. I've always wanted to see this place ever since I was a kid."

"Yeah," Jim agreed quietly.

There was a pause, an exchange of awkward smiles between Aaron and the minister until at last the silence was broken by a clap of her hands. "Right then."

It seemed to Jim that the sound took an age to die away, the passage left ringing round them as they followed her. Her plait was weaving to and fro like a serpent preparing to strike.

"You were a child when your grandmother told you about the abbess, then? Have you ever read up on the story since?"

"I could never find much about it at the library back home. Not even online, to tell the truth. I bought a book about Greenwood at a gas station on the edge of town, but I didn't get a chance to finish reading the part about the abbey before we got here."

"That'll be Dr. Hutton's *History and Folklore*. It's her grandson runs the garage. Wonderful book. A bit old-fashioned, but it was written a good while back now."

They had stopped some twenty or so feet short of the end of the corridor, which terminated in yet another faux-mediaeval door, this one not much larger than its modern domestic descendant. Some of the stones

that made up the door's surrounding archway stood out from the rest of the clean Victorian masonry; their surface rougher, their colour darker. Set into the wall on the left-hand side was a very proper-looking little Victorian niche. Within was what appeared to be another of these blacked blocks, though the depth of the recess shaded the object from view. Only Jim seemed to notice the thing, and he frowned at it as the others spoke.

"So what did your grandmother tell you? About the abbess, I mean? What was the story?"

"Oh, um, King Henry sent his men to the abbey to see if there was anything worth taking, and basically to shut the place down like he was doing with all the other monasteries and nunneries. The men got lost on the way and arrived late that night. The place was all lit up and they thought the nuns were holding some kind of midnight Mass in the chapel. But when they went in there were only children. A whole congregation of them. That part wasn't in the book, now I think of it."

Jim leaned closer to the niche. It wasn't just shadow that surrounded lump of stone; darkness seemed to emanate from it like sooty smoke. He blinked, and blinked again as he stared harder.

"These children were all the children of the nuns. I don't know how they knew that, really. Anyway, they'd had them in secret and that meant they were all sinners, because they'd broken their vows. The men went into the nuns' quarters and found them all passed out drunk. And they were really angry, but also really pleased, I guess, because this was exactly the kind of thing King Henry thought was going on. But when they got to the abbess... Elisabeth Cowton, that was her name, wasn't it?"

"It was," the minister nodded, "and there are still a few Cowtons round here."

"They went into her room and they found she wasn't alone. There with the abbess was 'The Man of the Woods,' which Grandma said is what they called the devil. 'He was as black as a shadow'—that's what she'd say. So Henry's men knew that Elisabeth was in collusion with The Enemy—that she'd damned not only her own soul but those of her Sisters and their children. So the men fled the abbey and they barred the doors. They

gathered wood from the forest around and they got torches and they built a fire. And they burned the abbey and everyone in it.”

Jim started back suddenly, his shoe letting out a squeal like a kicked dog as it scuffed the polished floor. Aaron and the minister looked round to see Jim standing with his back to one wall of the corridor staring at the shadowed thing in the niche opposite with barely contained terror.

“Oh dear,” said the minister, sympathetically but with a little laugh. “Yes, it’s not the kind of thing you’d expect to find visiting a church, I suppose. Sorry if it gave you a shock.”

She leant over and flicked a switch on the wall next to where Jim stood frozen. A small LED spotlight fizzled into life and the darkness within the niche faded.

“This door at the end here is nineteenth-century, but as you can see some of the stones around it are older than that. This is roughly where the entrance to the old chapel once was. The blocks were a part of the abbey. Some say they’re fifth-century, others earlier still. When the place was rebuilt they incorporated as much of the old material as they could into the new structure, but Victorian sensibilities forbade them from reinstating the statue inside the church itself. We think He might have been supporting a font or something similar at one time.”

“He” was a squat figure carved from the same blackish stone as the ancient blocks, his hands aloft and head forward in much the same attitude as the Titan Atlas bearing the world. Whatever weight had rested upon those shaggy shoulders, however—their hair chiselled with flowing curls—was long gone. The face was bearded and though human in features, unmistakably goatish in form with a leering, almost lecherous expression; the tongue protruded slightly between the teeth. The eyes were two deep, black holes bored into the stone. A pair of pointed ears stuck out at right angles to the two great horns, which curved back over the curly-haired head. Around the furred body were wound what appeared to be the coils of a snake. The legs were as shaggy as the rest, their lower portions and feet hidden behind carved leaves whose thorny vines formed an intricate decorative surround.

Aaron, a glasses-lifting grin on his face, immediately began taking photographs.

"This is The Man of the Woods." The minister sounded proud and a little mischievous as she spoke. "I'm pleased that's what your grandmother told you he was called. I understand why she said he was the devil. That's what Henry's men thought, of course, and that is what he looks like, I suppose. The statue, I mean. The goat-headed devil is a fairly modern idea, though. The horned Naigamesha, benefactor of children, was being worshipped by the Jains in India at least two hundred years before Jesus was born. The Goat-God Pan by the Ancient Greeks, of course."

"It's sort of like The Green Man, then?" said Aaron, still clicking away at his camera, crouching and moving to find new and better angles for each successive flurry of images. "A pre-Christian nature thing? But then why not have it inside the church? I thought the Victorians loved all that stuff."

Jim, his back still to the wall but his attitude now more one of disgust than fear, made a contemptuous scoffing sound. "Because of its dick!"

Aaron fumbled, almost dropping his camera, but the minister only laughed and nodded.

"I wouldn't have put it quite like that, but you're right. Some people think it's a tail or a snake, but if you look closely it actually starts right there between his legs then curls backward and around his body. He's a fertility deity just like Pan. Maybe he is Pan or, as you say, The Green Man. Perhaps some kind of mix of the two. In any case he's something ancient. Something primal. Something that has always been here."

Angela reached out a hand towards Aaron. "Would you like me to take a picture? The two of you with the statue, I mean."

"That would be great! It's this button right here. Hold it down and it'll take a few shots in a row. You can use the viewfinder or the screen on the back."

Having handed over the camera, Aaron eagerly pulled off his rucksack and jacket. He stood to one side of the niche and folded his arms, then thought better of it and tucked his thumbs into the front pockets of his skinny jeans instead. Seemingly hesitant of getting too close to the idol,

Jim shuffled over to take his place on the other side of the recess. As the minister clicked away Jim's eyes remained fixed on the niche as if waiting for some sign of movement.

"When you say they found her with The Man of the Woods..." Jim's voice a low monotone. "She was with him. They were having sex."

"Jesus Christ, Jim!" Then, realising his blasphemy, Aaron added, "Oh. Oh, I'm so sorry, Minister."

"You're right again. Layton, Henry's Visitor who wrote the report on the burning of the abbey, said they found the abbess lying with The Man of the Woods. I'm not surprised your grandmother left that detail out, Aaron. But, just as you said, that was exactly the sort of thing they'd been sent to discover. It was too good to be true, and of course it wasn't. No, I believe the King's men stumbled upon some kind of blessing of the young which was being carried out by the nuns in accordance with a pre-Christain tradition. The figure would have been here long before the Black Order even existed; the beliefs and practices that went with it too. Dr. Hutton wrote about it in her book. She put it down better than I could explain it, of course."

The minister handed the camera back to Aaron, Jim immediately sidestepping away from the niche until he stood next to the door at the end of the passageway.

"There's still a tradition of coming and touching it. Giving Him a bit of a rub if you want to fall pregnant. Some of the mums who are in the hall today have done it. Quite a few of them actually. And, if it works, they bring the children down here to thank Him."

"And you have no problem with that?" asked Aaron, already thumbing his way through the images on his camera's screen. "As a Christian, I mean."

"This is a Unitarian church. Many Christians would argue that we're heretics anyway. We believe that Jesus was just a man. A good man, but just a man. We believe in the oneness of God, and that many paths can lead to Him or Her. The Man in the Woods, He's part of that too."

Retrieving a bunch of keys from a deep pocket of her long woolly cardigan, Angela unlocked the door at Jim's side. The hinges let out a groan that shot forth and multiplied in the huge space beyond. The Gothic church interior was bathed in the tinted radiance of stained glass, patches of colour shifting as the thinning clouds rolled high above. The minister passed through the door and Aaron was on the threshold when Jim clapped a hand on his shoulder.

"We'd better get going," he spoke almost through clenched teeth. Aaron could feel the heat of the hand even through his clothing. Beads of sweat stood out on his reddened forehead. Aaron tried to look him in the eye, but Jim's gaze was fixed on the niche on the wall.

"Are you okay? You don't look so good, man."

"I'm fine—" his eyes still locked on the niche—"I just think we should get on the road, you know?"

"It's not even one-thirty. There's plenty of time, and I really want to see this place. I have since I was a kid. We're lucky to have someone show us around, you know? If you're not feeling good maybe you should head back to the van and grab a couple hours sleep. I think there's some NyQuil in the glove-box."

"Is everything all right?" The minister's words were a watery shimmering echo, like a voice from the depths of some Stygian cave.

"Yeah, sorry. Jim's not feeling too good, so he's going to head back to the van." Aaron placed a hand on Jim's shoulder, mirroring his own gesture empathetically. "You lie down, man. I'll see you back at the van, yeah?"

As Aaron passed through the portal into the church Jim saw him bathed in blood red for a second and then he was gone; lost somewhere among a kaleidoscopically coloured forest of columns and arches that seemed to shift and tilt before his eyes. Jim could hear nothing but twinkling reverberation in place of words or footsteps. He knew he couldn't go in. He wanted to call after his friend, to tell him he wasn't safe, that they needed to get away from the place, but a part of him knew how ridiculous that would sound. Even so, Jim could not prevent himself from breaking into a run as he passed the leering thing in the niche.

Gaining more speed, he sprinted along the corridor, which seemed somehow to have tripled in length. At last he reached its end and skidded around the corner, colliding with an oversized buggy shrouded in moisture-fogged plastic. The carriage rocked almost to the point of tipping before righting itself with a wobble. A duet of bleating squeals erupted from beneath the opaque covering, and it was all Jim could do not to cover his ears at the sound. He mumbled an apology at the parent, who jogged out of the church hall inferno towards the cries, but couldn't stand the idea of seeing what might be revealed when the cover was lifted.

Outside the rain had stopped, the sun shining bright through thinning wispy clouds. The air felt icy in his lungs as he took in one long deep breath after another. He stood there on the steps of the hall, hot palms pressed to his eyes, head back. He felt his heart rate begin to slow and continued to focus on taking in the cool air. After a few seconds he dropped his hands and looked around, reassuring himself that everything was fine. Everything was normal. To his left were a handful of grand Victorian monuments looking more like small houses than tombs with their columned porches and pitched roofs. Beyond them was the high wall. Straight ahead was the path leading to the porchway that he and Aaron had sheltered in nearly two hours earlier. The door within was no longer wide open but slightly ajar; just enough to reassure him that it was still unlocked. Part of him still wanted to run to it, to fling the door open and head off down the road, but terror was giving way to confusion now. What had just happened? He tried to think back. Just a little. The swirling lights and shifting architecture of the chapel swam before his mind's eye... the ebon face of the thing in the niche leering out of every shadow, every void made by the confused intersection of every impossible angle. His scalp prickled, pressure building in his temples. He quickly shut his eyes once again. Focused on his breathing.

The rasping caw roused Jim from his meditations. On his right was the horny thicket of Briar Acre—a lunatic tangle of bushes, vines, and thorns whose height exceeded that of the wall by several feet in some places. The corvid was perched there, its wiry claws grasping at a gnarled branch not

much thicker than its own leg, its wings flapping restlessly as it let out its harsh call again and again. Jim approached the bird almost without realising he was doing so. It was joined by another, and then another. The crows hopped and flapped from thorny stem to twisted stalk cawing in agitation. Were they defending their nest? Did they see him as a threat? Jim was about to take a step back when something moved in the grass at the briar's edge. It slithered into the darkness of the thicket before he could see what it was. A snake? Did they have snakes in England? He moved closer. At first he thought it was his own shadow thrown before him by the afternoon sun. That made sense. The stretching of the lower legs, the broadening of the torso. Its blackness even. Its utter blackness. But not the head. Not what crowned it. As Jim turned to flee, Briar Acre shook so violently it seemed as if every tendril, every creeper, every vine were about to burst forth in his pursuit. The convent of crows wheeled into the air still incanting their creaking mantra.

* * *

The minister's tour of the church culminated in a climb up a creaking wooden staircase of somewhat questionable safety into the ringing chamber beneath the spire. A heavy rope swung lazily in the middle of the dusty square room whose light came from four slit-like glassless windows, one set into each of the walls. It was Angela who smelt it first and moved to one of the narrow openings to investigate. Aaron tried another and found himself looking out over the ancient wild plot. At its centre was the Dormobile, a crazed path mown in the vehicle's wake. The camper-van was in flames, the surrounding vegetation also burning fiercely, fuelled—it was later discovered—by the petrol from the jerry-can filled by Aaron that morning.

Dark, rough stones that once belonged to the abbey and its ancestors were later discovered laid out in neat rows, hidden there beneath the canopy of thorns for centuries. Each, it transpired, served as a marker for a coffinless grave. In several of those excavated the blackened bones of children were found, though whether age, burning, or some congenital

malformation had shaped the remains so strangely—especially those fragments of skull, legs, and feet that were discovered—could not be agreed upon. In other graves were found the charred bones of women, and these it was generally agreed must be the Sisters of the Black Order. Though some archaeologically inclined persons pressed for the rest of Briar Acre to be cleared and excavated, the authorities were satisfied that the remains discovered were historic, and the land remained in the ownership of the church, which had no such investigatorial leanings. The question of how the sixteenth-century burials took place upon a plot already recorded as impenetrable in the Domesday book of 1086, and likewise ever since, has never been properly explained.

Jim's actions seemed partly explained at least when, racked with guilt, the Hillfoot's landlord confessed to preparing toadstools as part of a breakfast he thought would be served to Aaron, to whom he admitted he had taken an instant dislike. The intention, he maintained, was merely to cause a stomach upset. Something to send the "gypsies" on their way. A sample of the fungus that the landlord had found growing wild along the edge of Briar Acre was subsequently obtained and tested. It was, however, found to be quite edible and lacking any recognised psycho-active compound.

Jim was found not far from the burning van, face down among the brambles. It was presumed that some of the petrol he doused Briar Acre with must have splashed onto his clothing, though why only his back was covered and thus ignited could not be adequately explained. That which wasn't burned was raw and torn, undoubtedly from a desperate dash through the barbarous thorns and spurs, seeking in vain to escape that at his back. Indeed, Jim was so entangled in the vines and undergrowth, it was almost obscured from view—as if the thicket had already begun creeping over his corpse. The head, unprotected as it was, was the worst affected. Blind panic is a phrase never more accurately portrayed than it was upon Jim's terror-stricken face, for the thorns had all but taken his eyes. Beneath his body they found yet another grave. This one contained an almost intact

female skeleton, clinging to which were fragments of an ancient abbess's habit.

The Quest

MOLLIE L. BURLESON

Mollie L. Burleson's fiction and poetry has appeared in such magazines as Lore, Crypt of Cthulhu, and Midnight Echo, and in numerous anthologies, including 100 Vicious Little Vampire Stories, 100 Wicked Little Witch Stories, 100 Creepy Little Creature Stories, Horror for the Holidays, Black Wings, and Horrors! 365 Scary Stories. Her literary criticism has appeared in Lovecraft Studies and Studies in Weird Fiction. She lives in Roswell, New Mexico, with her writer husband Don and numerous cats.



AS THE PLANE SETTLED ON THE RUNWAY, MELANIE GAZED out the window at her first glimpse of Port Smith. For most people, probably not much to see here, but she looked forward to the real town, the home of her beloved mentor.

She picked up her luggage and rented a car and, after what seemed an eternity, was driving down those fabled streets, the streets he once walked.

Just to think that he had passed these houses and viewed the ocean from the heights made her heart skip a beat. I hope, she thought, I can meet people who have read his books, his stories, and know about the master.

She drove to the hotel and let a valet park her car in the subterranean depths. Costly, but worth it. After unpacking and eating a hasty meal in the tea shop, she decided to walk about the old town.

Here was honored Broad Street, where her idol once walked, and now she walked it, her dream come true. She passed houses she guessed to be two to three hundred years old. How privileged he was to have been born here! There were houses that probably figured in some of his stories. Even Melanie herself could feel these influences upon her, and if she were a writer, she felt, even she could have penned great tales of mystery and cosmic horror.

It was getting late and dark, and Melanie turned her steps back up the hilly street toward the hotel. After a quick shower she put on her pajamas and sank into the oversized and comfortable bed. Her last thoughts before sleep were focused on her joy at being in Port Smith at last.

The next day dawned bright and sunny. Great! She could do more hoofing it about, searching out Bingham's haunts. Her first goal was the

bookstore associated with Fulham College, which was known throughout the East Coast.

Melanie figured she'd find a wealth of treasures there, either things he wrote or books about him. Excitedly she walked past the school, old and ivied, and found that her mouth actually watered, thinking about Bingham's nightly perambulations through the hallowed grounds. Bookstore first, college later, she cautioned herself.

The bookstore was a fair-sized place with many sections, but where was the only one she was interested in? She stopped a clerk and asked him where the books on her idol were.

"Well, ma'am, do you mean the old guy who wrote weird tales in the twenties and thirties?"

"Yes," she exclaimed, "who else?"

The clerk told her that there really wasn't much in the store by or about him.

"You've got to be kidding!"

"Nope, he really is not very well known here."

"Not known here? But he was born here, lived and wrote here. It's unbelievable that you don't have tons of his works. Where is the little you do have on him?"

The clerk indicated a small section of the store containing Bingham's work.

Melanie looked in dismay at the rather sparse collection the store offered. She picked up one of each item and headed to the checkout counter.

"Will that be all?"

"Yes, if that's all you have." Melanie walked out the door with her meager treasures clutched in her arms.

Now for a bite of lunch, she thought. She saw an Italian restaurant on the corner and went in. She was seated and ordered spaghetti and meatballs, her favorite and his, from what she had read of him. She knew a lot about Bingham but wanted to know more, much more.

After lunch she headed for the James K. Pullman Library. What a wonderful place this is, she thought, admiring the ornate and beautiful building with its marble columns. She met the head librarian and gleaned some additional information about her mentor—the date and place of his birth, the houses in which he had lived—and with the help of the assistant librarian she was actually able to see some original manuscripts of Bingham's works. She stood in awe, yearning to run her fingers over those precious words scribbled in a small, hard-to-read script, but then she was shown something almost better than his written words: a photograph of the man, probably the only one ever taken of him, a man tall and thin, pale-faced and non-smiling, a man who looked back at her from the print in a haunting way. At last she could see him, the writer whose works she had admired for so long.

Closing time arrived and Melanie had to leave, but not before she had another look at the manuscripts. She thanked the librarians and with a sigh walked out the door.

She decided to head back to the hotel, have dinner, and hit the sack early, so she'd be rested and ready to do more sniffing around tomorrow. Her idol's aura still permeated the town and its environs, and she felt that not only was she learning a lot about him, but was assimilating his very essence.

She woke early, dressed, ate a spartan breakfast, and headed out the door. Another great day, she thought. No rain in the forecast.

She passed Fulham College and on impulse stopped and wandered through its wrought-iron gates. The college was very attractive; she felt its antiquity as a tactile presence, and with it Bingham's pervasive influence. She felt at home and warm, as if the master himself were standing beside her.

There were little knots of students milling about talking, and some were evidently headed to classes. She also saw several older people walking between the many different buildings. Walking up to one of the older men, she asked him where she could find more information about Charles Lloyd

Bingham. He looked at her as if she were speaking Chinese. "Never heard of him, lady. Sorry."

She kept on walking, passing other people, and this time asked a student about her mentor. "Do you know anything about the writer Charles Lloyd Bingham?"

The student, a pretty girl, said she was sorry but she had never heard of the man; but she did tell Melanie that in Newton Hall there was an older professor, named Richardson, who might possibly know of him.

Like a bloodhound on the trail, Melanie sought out the indicated building. She entered the huge edifice and was struck at first by the seemingly endless dark wooden doors that stretched out before her. Her footsteps echoed hollowly upon the gleaming wood floors with the smell of polish and wax permeating the air. The place seemed not unlike some ancient hallways she had trod in her youth, hallways in old abbeys and monasteries she had visited with her parents, places that imparted a sense of comfort, of haven; but the halls in this building gave no feeling of comfort. They were like a breath held in, a vague expectancy. She finally found one door with a small white cardboard inserted in a brass holder that read: *Professor Paul Richardson*.

Melanie knocked tentatively on the door. No response. She tried again, this time a bit louder, and was almost ready to leave, when she heard a lock being turned inside and the door was opened abruptly. Before her stood a man about sixty years old, clean-shaven, dressed in a blue pullover and jeans. "Yes?"

"I'm sorry to bother you, sir, but I was told you might know something about the writer Charles Lloyd Bingham. I'm Melanie Evans, and I've come to Port Smith to search out anything I can find about him. He's sort of my mentor and I love his works."

The professor looked at her with curiosity, nodded, and moved aside, inviting her in.

The room in which she stood was replete with old, heavy furniture, Victorian in style, and the floor was covered with Oriental rugs, worn but

still lovely. The walls were lined with bookcases, and chock full of what appeared to be real leather tomes in rich shades of red, blue, and green.

"What a nice place you have," Melanie said. "So apt for a professor in such a prestigious college."

Professor Richardson nodded his head in appreciation of her kind words. "Yes, I am fortunate to have tenure here. A happy and satisfied man."

He invited her to sit in a dark red leather chair. "So very comfortable," she observed.

He didn't waste much time on amenities, but plunged right in and asked Melanie why she was interested in Charles Lloyd Bingham.

"It's a long story. Are you sure you want to hear it?"

The man nodded, sat back in his chair, and folded his hands in anticipation. "By all means."

"Well, years ago I went to our town library's book sale on the green and rummaged through the many offerings. I finally spotted a plain, ordinary volume in black leather and noticed it was an anthology of sci-fi and horror short stories. I bought it and took it home and began to read the tales. They were very interesting to me, especially the last one in the book, by Mr. Bingham. It was like a magnet and drew me to it and I read it all at once, devouring every word. That one story led me on and I searched everywhere I could think of, looking for more. I was like a drug addict and needed my fix." Melanie stopped in her narrative and said, "I found out where he was from on the back of one of the book jackets. That's why I came to his city, to learn what more I could about him."

"Quite a tale, my dear," he said when she had finished. "I too found our man in an obscure collection and, after reading one tale, craved more. His fiction was full of encounters with ancient gods and other forces, showing that mankind is ineffective and helpless, that the universe is vast and frightening, blind and uncaring. Things I personally subscribe to, things that set my mind on its journey to a wondrous culmination of my dreams." He paused, then asked, "Would you like some tea? I have a little time before my next class and could use a break."

Melanie agreed eagerly and, after she sipped from her cup, asked the professor if he was still as interested in the writer as ever.

He nodded, and discussed at length his impressions of Charles Lloyd Bingham. Melanie listened, enraptured, and hung onto Professor Richardson's every word.

"Well, my child, time to run. Have to teach some poor benighted souls about the Periodic Table and do some lab work."

Melanie got up from her chair and placed the cup and saucer on a nearby table and headed for the door, saying, "Thank you for the tea and for your words on my favorite author."

"No! Not that way, my dear. It's just a storage room where I keep dusty old stuff." He pointed out the correct door.

Before leaving, Melanie asked the professor if she could see him again. "I want to know all I can about Bingham, and you are a fount of information. You make him seem real."

"Of course, Ms. Evans, he's real to me, too. I'd be honored for your company. How about tomorrow at four?"

Arrangements being made, Melanie left the college grounds on what felt like winged feet. I'll learn more tomorrow about Bingham, she told herself; the professor seems to know about him intimately.

She slept like a babe that night, with dreams of Charles Lloyd Bingham and the spinning universe and the countless untold stars.

The next day she fidgeted and fussed, paced the floor, and gazed out the window at the charming city with its nearby green-domed building. Finally the hour approached, and she wound her way through the college grounds to the professor.

It was four o'clock on the dot as she knocked on that solid, dark, almost forbidding door. It opened quickly and Professor Richardson stood there, inviting her in. "Good afternoon, Ms. Evans. I trust your day has gone well."

Melanie replied that the day had been all right, but this meeting was what she'd been waiting for.

After they had settled comfortably in their chairs, the professor looked intently at her. "In all my years as a teacher, I have never met anyone with such fervor regarding Bingham as you show. I too love his works, but I think I have gone much further than you in my quest to know the man."

"How much further?"

"You know, of course, his feelings about writing, that everything in print is not all fiction, that sometimes a person's work could be real, could have happened?"

"No, I didn't know that, but he was such a good writer that for a time I believed the ancient book he referred to in many of his tales actually existed. And I sometimes wondered if the beings he wrote about were not just fantasy, but real. Of course I now know they weren't. Still, it was exciting when I thought they were."

The professor sat up straighter and grasped the chair's arms. "But what if not all that he wrote about *was* fiction after all? What if some of the things did exist, and not only in his imagination? Mayhap he was privy to a strange and alien world that only few knew about."

Melanie sat wide-eyed, mouth partly agape and responded. "Are you saying that some of what he wrote about was real?"

He didn't respond with an answer to her question, but said, instead, "And what about bringing back the dead as in his novel, *The Awakener*, or several others about revival of the long dead? Of course one would need some tools and chemicals to do that."

"You don't expect me to believe something like that could be possible?" She shook her head.

"And why not, if one had the equipment needed and the persistence to follow it through, and most necessary of all, the perfect subject?"

She stared at him, partial doubt and partial fear passing over her face.

"Would you like to see what I have done, Melanie? What I have accomplished with my talents and with the help of an old, obscure, forbidden book?"

He arose from his chair and headed for the apartment's rear door, the one he had said led to a room that contained 'dusty old stuff.' He beckoned

to her. "Come, my dear, and see, not what God hath wrought, but what I have."

He opened the door. The room behind it appeared, only dimly lit, but after a few moments its contents became horribly clear.

Melanie screamed and ran for the front door, dashing out into the cavernous hallway and to safety.

She went to the hotel, packed her bags, and checked out, nervously peering behind her all the while. She had the valet retrieve her car and drove to the airport, dropping it off at the rental place. She spoke to the woman at the reservation desk and found that there was a plane about to leave in thirty minutes for the West.

Her heart was still not beating in a normal rhythm, but she did start to relax a little as the huge plane left the ground. Only then did she breathe more easily, only then was she able to let her shoulders droop and to give a sigh of relief. She tried to shut out those last moments in the apartment. Let me get home first, she thought, before I think about them. With any luck, maybe she could shut them out for good.

But it was not to be. Every time she closed her eyes she saw the opened door, saw the face. A face she knew. A face etched in fear and alarming in its entreaty. As she had stared at it, it almost seemed to plead with her to help, to end the living torture that had been thrust upon it. The eyes, sunken in the ghostly image, stared at her, the mouth drawn into a rictus, the arms outstretched in supplication. So it was true, what Richardson had only hinted at. He had found a way to do what she had thought only existed in fiction, existed only in the mind of the man upon whom he had practiced his foul deeds.

For the thing that had sat up shakily from the table in that dimly lit room had looked into her eyes and had driven her to run blindly from the horror of it all—the face in her dreams, the face she would never forget, the nightmarish face of Charles Lloyd Bingham.

A Question of Blood

DAVID HAMBLING

David Hambling lives in Norwood, South London. He has been weaving a web of Lovecraftian tales around the area and focused on the 1920s, starting with his collection The Dulwich Horror and Others (PS Publishing, 2015) and continuing with the Harry Stubbs series. He is otherwise known as a science and technology journalist and cat lover.

He had wild and original ideas on the independent vital properties of organic cells and nerve-tissue separated from natural physiological systems; and achieved some hideous preliminary results in the form of never-dying, artificially nourished tissue obtained from the nearly hatched eggs of an indescribable tropical reptile.

—H. P. LOVECRAFT, “HERBERT WEST—REANIMATOR”



LIKE EVERY ORPHAN, I HARBORED A FANTASY OF MY lost family. When a letter from my late mother reached me on my twenty-first birthday, and I discovered that I had a grandfather and an aunt in England, I knew I had to return. My enthusiasm was barely cooled by the formal and strictly polite letter in which my grandfather agreed to see me. I sensed that journeying to England was not a wise thing to do, and everyone advised against it. But the call of blood is strong.

It cost me every penny I had to purchase a passage from Quebec to London. The crossing took an age. Every day I took up my station at the prow, willing the land to appear ahead, the land of my dreams. I was the first passenger to disembark at Southampton, not waiting for the porters but hauling my flimsy suitcase down the gangplank. As soon as I was ashore I asked directions for the railway station. Arriving at Waterloo, I sought out the first taxi that would take me to Norwood.

At twenty-one I was a man at last, free and independent, and the world was wonderful. I craned my head to see the rows and rows of tall houses, the factory chimneys, and the streets clogged with people. I had forgotten how populous London was, and how thick the smoky air even without fog. Trams, delivery vans, and cars packed the roads. There were electric lights everywhere. After years on the prairie, it was like arriving in a city of the future.

I had imagined a thousand times how I would be embraced by a beaming grandfather who would shower the riches of inheritance upon me. What orphanage boy does not think he will one day be recognised as a prince?

The address was in Central Hill, a long ridge in Upper Norwood, clear above the smoke and enjoying sweeping views down on the City. My spirits rose further when I saw the fine old house that bespoke generations of settled wealth. Impetuously, I tipped the taxi driver the last of my English coins and marched up to the door.

I was admitted by a soft-spoken butler into a hallway with a vaulted ceiling and a stone floor. It had the grandeur of a church, the cloistered hush and the chill of chambers that had never known the sun. I seemed to have stepped back half a century in time. A photograph of a man in uniform, blown up to life-size, hung over an empty fireplace. Rows of medals adorned his chest, and his shoulders were garnished with gold braid; his hat was under one arm, and the other hand rested on his sword hilt. Of course, it was his face that struck me, because it was my face, or at least more like it than any I had ever seen. He was considerably older than I, a senior officer, but dashing enough that you could see him leading a cavalry charge. A black ribbon cut across one corner of the picture.

I felt my heart leap in my chest.

"Who is that man?" I asked the butler, who I later discovered was called Sams.

"That is Colonel Beaumont, sir."

Sams spoke so low I had to ask him to repeat it. Then I saw the brass plate at the base of the picture. Colonel Sir Matthew Beaumont, DSO, MBE—Matthew Beaumont, but my father's name was Mark. He was surely an uncle.

"Did he die in the war?"

"He fell at the battle of Cambrai," said Sams, in a half-whisper that I had to lean forward to catch. All the servants there were the same; none of them raised their voices to anything approaching a conversational tone.

I gazed at my uncle's portrait, taking in the familiar eyes and nose, my own jawline, and those rows of medals. A door opened down the hall and a woman in white emerged, hand-in-hand with a small child in a cream smock. He was an angelic creature with blond corkscrew curls. When she

saw me, the nurse froze and backed away. Her charge stood there, mouth open, until the nurse whisked him away and the door closed again.

"This way, sir," Sams insisted.

Sams led me up a broad staircase and along a corridor. He knocked gently and waited for a response. Sams gave the impression of one who is reluctantly bringing bad news, and I was forewarned that this was not to be a jolly homecoming but something else entirely. As we entered, I was pinned by the gaze of the man behind the desk, and I knew my situation exactly. I had been brought to the headmaster's study for punishment.

My grandfather was a formidable man, with the dour aspect of an Old Testament prophet. The lines and crevices were so deeply set in his face that it might have been carved out of oak. Life had fitted him with a mask for an actor playing the part of Judgment. He must have been in his seventies, and his hair and beard were a uniform steely grey. He did not stand to greet me.

"Master Paul Pennywell," announced the butler, and seemed relieved when the old man dismissed him. Sams backed out and closed the door noiselessly.

"I'm very pleased to meet you at last, sir," I said, with my last lingering wisps of optimism.

My grandfather looked at me as closely as I had studied the portrait, tracing the lines of family likeness. But he was not looking at me with the eyes of an admirer, but as a critic looking at an inferior copy, searching out the flaws and weaknesses as compared to the original. He did not offer me a seat, and I did not take one.

I looked back at him until I had to look away. I had a vague impression of bookshelves, and walls lined with biblical scenes: Belshazzar's Feast, Cain murdering Abel, the Tower of Babel cast down.

"Are you a Christian?" he demanded. As if to make up for Sams, Grandfather's voice seemed amplified by a loudspeaker.

I stammered that I was.

"What church do you attend?"

I told him about St Aidan's, and my grandfather went on to quiz me on my schooling, my occupation as a farmhand in Canada, and my personal habits regarding drinking, gambling, and the opposite sex. Nothing seemed to surprise or please him. He wore the same frown throughout the interview.

"It seems sending you away was for the good," he said. "You have, so far, avoided the excesses you might have fallen prey to, and have no obvious defects. If you return to Canada, live in a plain, Christian community away from the fleshpots of the city and work hard, you might yet escape the snares set out for you."

"But sir," I protested, "I have come here as the rightful heir of Mark Beaumont."

I pulled from my pocket the letter from my late mother, forwarded by the lawyers. Somehow, Latham and Rowe had found my address and sent me her letter, along with copies of the marriage and birth registers and a short note explaining my current situation. I was painfully aware of how few months separated the wedding and my birth, but my identity as a Beaumont and my legitimacy were beyond doubt.

As a child, I had always believed I was an orphan, but like many others I was given away as a baby. My mother's letter revealed that she had been put away in a hospital for the morally defective, while my father had been compelled to return to the family. The solicitor's letter said she died shortly after writing it.

My grandfather's face darkened, a sky eclipsed by thunderclouds, and his wrath was as sudden and intense as a summer storm.

"How dare you!" he bellowed, and I cringed at the volume. "Your father was a viper in my bosom, a coward, a wastrel, a gambler, a thief, a drunkard, and a whoremonger. And he was a heathen! When he ran off with a harlot and produced a bastard, that unholy union was never sanctioned by God's church. You have no legitimacy!"

"But sir—" I started. I don't think he heard me.

"My beloved son Matthew died a hero in the war—a war in which your father was not fit to serve! Afterwards, it was your father's duty to produce a

legitimate heir for the family, something he was incapable of doing on his own. It was laid to me to find him a wife from a good family, and to ensure that his dissipation did not prevent him from fathering a child. And, thankfully, the Lord granted us an heir, in spite of your father's sins."

The colour in his face softened and his voice had dropped now, but the passion was still there, rolling like summer thunder in the distance.

"You were brought up to farming in the colonies. Your education may be deficient, but even you know about the difference between breeding from good stock and bad." He jabbed a finger at a framed portrait of King George V beside his desk. "His Majesty does not reign over us because he has passed a public examination, or has been voted into office. He reigns because of his blood. The Bible tells of the importance of blood, and science confirms it. Fashionable politics may say otherwise, because politicians flatter the mob into thinking they are the equal of their betters. But no politician believes a coal heaver is really the equal of a count.

"The Beaumont family is among the finest in England. We trace our line to the Conquest, and there has never been the slightest stain in our blood. The heir of the family must come from equally good stock—and young Matthew has an impeccable bloodline. He will grow up straight and true, a gentleman to his marrow. If he was brought up in a slum, he would be as strong, courageous and honest as any Englishman. Because of his blood.

"But you! You were brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did your mother conceive you. Your father might have been a Beaumont, but you are a half-caste. 'Thou shalt not let thy cattle gender with a diverse kind: thou shalt not sow thy field with mingled seed.' So saith the prophet, because what is hybrid is unclean. You were born to a low woman of the most vicious stock, a moral imbecile. You may have the appearance of a decent young man now, but blood will always out. Even if you could overcome your natural tendencies by willpower or grace—something which I gravely doubt—the bad seed would pollute our line. Yea, even unto the seventh generation.

“No. No.” He shook his head with solemn finality. “The orphanage gave you the name Pennywell, and you shall keep that name. You can never be a Beaumont, boy. As guardian of the family name I absolutely forbid you to use it.”

By the time he had finished I was practically choked by tears of frustration and rage. The sharp pang of rejection pierced my heart.

“Then why did you let me come here?” I sobbed. “When I haven’t the money to go back?”

“Bring you here? I didn’t bring you here.” He was not angry now, but spoke with the vindictive pleasure of a man who wants to rub his opponents’ face in defeat. “Your pride brought you here, foolish pride fostered by your foolish mother. Now I have lifted the scales from your eyes, Master Paul Pennywell. Now you know your place, and will not think any more of troubling your betters.”

The sheer injustice, the hopelessness of my situation pressed down on me. This old man was pitiless.

“But where can I go, if you won’t take me?”

“Go where you will,” he said. I sobbed again, but had no reply. He nodded, satisfied that his work was done, and pulled a velvet bell cord. “For my part, I did what I could to save you and give you the best start in life. I have done my duty by you and the Almighty. Goodbye, Paul Pennywell.”

Sams appeared and conducted me back down to the hall, still half-sobbing. While the butler was fetching my suitcase a small, round woman in black hurried up. Her face lit up when she saw me.

“You must be Paul,” she said, standing on tiptoes to kiss me on the cheek and taking both my hands. “Goodness, you look so like your father. And so tall!”

She beamed fondly at me without speaking for a long time. She was beyond youth and into middle age, and although the lines of her face were blurred and softened, I recognised the family features.

“Are you...?”

“Oh, how terribly rude of me! I’m Florence—your Aunt Florence I should say. Your own aunt. Your poor father’s sister.” She turned to the

butler. "Sams, have some tea sent to the parlour. Or do you drink coffee in Canada, Paul? You've travelled such a long way, it must have been a weary voyage. Have you eaten?"

"I'm afraid I must leave at once," I said awkwardly. "My grandfather... I mean, Mr Beaumont..."

"You didn't quarrel with him? He's short-tempered, he says things he doesn't mean."

"I didn't have a chance to quarrel," I said. "I think he objects to my very existence."

A quick understanding flashed across her face.

"What your father did is not your fault. I'm afraid your letter stirred up all Father's bad memories. They argued so, those two—but we can't just turn you out. I'll talk to Father after dinner when he's had his port. He's much better-tempered then. Now, you must come and have tea and tell me everything."

But it was Aunt Florence who did most of the talking. She was prone to jumping from topic to topic and kept forgetting how much was entirely new to me. Through the confusion I soon gathered a good deal of the family history. Mark, my father, had a twin brother called Matthew, the Colonel Beaumont whose photograph hung in the hall. Uncle Matthew, the eldest by half an hour, was the champion, showered from the start with presents and praise. Mark had been soured at an early age, becoming first sullen and then rebellious. While Matthew was winning school prizes for Greek composition and leading the rugby team to glory, Mark was punished for gambling and smoking.

Mark's greatest act of rebellion came when he ran off with a servant girl for six months. That was when I was conceived. She was a parlourmaid rather than a harlot. They married in a registry office a couple of months before I was born to secure my legitimacy. They had hoped that grandfather would eventually come round to accepting them, especially since brother Matthew was still an heirless bachelor.

But my father lacked the willpower and the means to carry the thing through. My mother was the practical one of the pair. She was a worker

and had the power to earn and manage money, but as she was progressively immobilised by her condition, my father found himself unable to pay the rent. Grandfather reeled my father back in. I was placed in the orphanage as soon as I was born, and my mother was incarcerated in a home for the morally insane, for the supposed crime of seducing a young gentleman and getting herself pregnant. She died after only a few months.

“Poor thing,” said Florence. “She pined away for her baby. It seemed very hard to me, but Father said it was the best thing for the child. For you.”

Florence hinted that she would happily have taken me on herself. She was unmarried, as it had been determined from an early age that her role was to look after her father. But having me in the house would have been too much of a scandal. Because of its location conveniently beyond the three-mile limit of the London parishes, Norwood has always had more than its share of orphanages. Most of them are little better than the grim ‘baby farms’ of earlier years. I grew up in one barely half a mile away, never suspecting that my family was still alive and living so close. I went down the path of most orphans brought up for the Empire: some were sent to farms in South Africa or Australia; Canada was my destiny.

My father had returned in deepest shame to the family home. After that he lived like a shadow in the corners. I have the impression that Grandfather liked to have him there as an object of humiliation, a living testimony to his direst warnings. Matthew married, under grandfather’s directions, soon after the war started.

My father remained there, an abject figure. He had to beg money from my aunt, his sister, or he would not have had any comforts. She hinted that he persisted in some vague, secret vice, but to her he was purely a figure of pity. Then Death took a hand. Colonel Matthew Beaumont was killed in action in 1918. Matthew’s wife was pregnant, but she died in the influenza epidemic that followed the war. The disgraced Mark was left as sole heir to the family name.

If Mark was to be the head of a continuing family, action needed to be taken. As Aunt Florence told it, Grandfather effectively bought his son a

bride. She was a modest eighteen-year-old debutante from an old family burdened with debt. The match secured her own family's finances, at the price of a forced marriage to a man she barely knew. She was duly entombed in this sepulchral building in Norwood under the watchful eye of her new father-in-law with her indifferent bridegroom.

"She was ever such a quiet little thing," said Florence, looking into her teacup. "We did try, but I don't know that she was quite comfortable here. She found life here too—" She struggled for a word. "Too serious."

No happy event followed for the married couple, apparently due to Mark's enfeebled state.

"Your grandfather sent him to a clinic in Harley Street for the Voronoff Process. He didn't want to go," said Florence.

I must have looked puzzled.

"The Voronoff Process," she said louder, as though I could not have heard. Then she stammered and blushed bright red. "There's a whole shelf of books about it in the library," she added quickly. "We were so happy when we found out she was expecting afterwards. But something about the operation wasn't right, and your father died before little Matthew was born."

History seemed about to repeat itself in cutting down the whole family when his wife succumbed to puerperal fever days after the birth. Incredibly, my half-brother, little Matthew, had lived. He was a tough little fellow and had gone on to survive any number of childhood illnesses and traumas.

"The servants never look after him properly," she complained.

Again, Aunt Florence was thwarted in her desire to raise a child herself; Grandfather feared she would mollicoddle the boy. But she said servants were no substitute for relatives, and they were never as careful of the boy's health as they should be. The fire had been allowed to go out overnight in his room in the dead of winter, and once he had a tumble downstairs. She revealed this in hushed tones. Grandfather must not know.

I caught a faint movement in the corner of my eye and turned quickly. I looked straight into a pair of china-blue eyes beneath blond hair. The boy was peeking shyly around the door.

“Matthew,” said Aunt Florence, “come and meet your brother.”

“Grandfather says he’s only a half-brother,” said the little boy. “What’s the other half?”

“That just means you have different mothers,” she replied, but Matthew was already gone.

“He’s skittish. It’ll be good for him having a big brother to look up to.”

I could imagine how curious he was about this strange interloper, in a house that was so quiet and had so few visitors, as curious about me as I was about him. But he was shy, as small boys not used to company often are. A bell rang downstairs, and Florence started guiltily.

“Oh dear, it’s time for prayers already,” she said. “I must go. You’d better stay with the servants until we sort things out with your grandfather. Sams will find you a room. What Father doesn’t know won’t hurt him.”

My suitcase and I were put in a small attic room that I was to share with Tommy, the boots. It was as cold as the rest of the house. There were no electric lights here, just cheap tallow candles, and it was as bare as a monk’s cell except for the magazine-cover pictures of movie starlets pinned to the slanting wall. They moved slightly in the draught. I waited a long hour alone while the rest of the family was at prayer.

Bitter thoughts circled around me. As a boy I had been sent into exile, transported like a criminal. As an adult I was put away out of sight in an attic room, as though I were a monster that must not be seen.

My mood improved little when Tommy came back and conducted me to supper. It was a meagre repast of soup and dark bread in the servants’ dining room. There was little conversation among the servants, who seemed cowed and did not meet one another’s eyes. My grandfather’s reign of fear seemed to cover the whole house.

But it did not extend quite everywhere. When we returned to the attic room, Tommy lit a cigarette, offered me one, and stretched out on his bed with a sigh of contentment. He was a good five years younger than I, brimming with the worldly wisdom of the city-dweller welcoming his country cousin. Up here, he talked at normal volume and gave his considered opinion of my life.

“You did the right thing coming back to London,” he said. “There’s nothing doing in Canada, eh? But this family here!” He shook his head and blew smoke. “Ask me, you had a lucky escape not growing up with ’em. I shouldn’t care to have the old tyrant as my granddad. Miss Florence’s not so bad, she’s sweet enough when his back is turned. Then you know all about the devil-child...”

“Why do you call him that?”

“A million reasons,” said Tommy. “A million. For one thing, he’s got a tail.”

I couldn’t tell whether this was a bit of servant’s gossip or if Tommy was testing my gullibility. I affected to be unimpressed.

“I’ve heard of children born with tails,” I said. “The doctors amputate when they’re a few days old, all that’s left is a scar.”

“They did amputate it—but it grew back!” he said triumphantly.

“That’s rot.”

“I’m only saying what I know. He’s a sneaky boy, he listens at doors and gets into things. Mr Mark, he was a strange man—Sams caught him reading a book hidden away in the library, and told me it was the filthiest thing he had ever seen, with... animals and things. Sams didn’t dare tell the old tyrant, it was that bad. The doctors gave Mr Mark monkey glands to help his male vitality, and that’s a well-known fact. Afterwards his balls swelled up like coconuts and he died. And then the mother, Mrs Alice, she died when the boy was born.”

“It’s tragic, but it doesn’t make Matthew a devil-child.”

“I’d say he was sent here as a punishment to someone. The wet nurse, did they tell you about her? I bet they didn’t.” Tommy was warming to his theme. “She was nursing the baby, see, and he was teething, and he bit her. The bite went septic and she died. That’s what they say—but did you ever hear of a bite that goes septic and kills in two days flat? ’Cos I never did.”

“No, I haven’t either,” I admitted.

Tommy blew out a long stream of smoke, satisfied that he had won the point.

“More like a curse, I’d say. Little Matthew is a cursed child. The old man drills him in his Bible all the time, but that’s never going to help. We keep a very wide berth around that boy, and you should do the same.”

“Grandfather doesn’t even want me in the house.”

“That’s typical of him—talk about ruling with a rod of iron and a whip of scorpions! I’m getting out of here as soon as I can save up, but with all the fines and stoppages out of your wages it’s taking an age.” He contemplated his fortune for two seconds, then turned to mine. “But what about you? What’s it really like in Canada?”

Tommy wanted to know about life on the prairie, which he imagined to be all cowboys and outlaws and sheriffs as in the Westerns. I was almost sorry to tell him that all we had were thousands of acres of wheat fields and not a cow to be seen for miles. I was equally sorry to tell him I had not rubbed shoulders with gangsters and bootleggers, in spite of being so close to the border with America. At least I could tell him about Mounties. He started to tell me about the films of Big Dan, none of which I had seen.

It was late when we finally snuffed out the candle, but in spite of my fatigue it took me a long time to drift off. I still felt there was some mistake. I was a prince, the legitimate heir, but to my grandfather—could that terrifying old man really be my grandfather?—I was an aberration to be sent away so I did not embarrass the family. Tommy snored three feet away.

I dreamed I was in the Garden of Eden. My grandfather, who was God, was thundering at my father and mother and sending them out of paradise, and cursing them to the seventh generation, while my Aunt Florence stood by and said he didn’t really mean it and offered everyone cups of blood. A little face with blue eyes watched me from the branches of a strange tree hung with grotesque fruit like coconuts.

Then a bird squawked, but it was a cry of pain, and it had wakened me.

“What is it?” I asked, but there was no reply except a whimper.

The only illumination was faint moonlight from the skylight above me. I fumbled with a box of matches for an age before I could light the candle. Tommy was sitting on his bed, holding his wrist and grimacing with pain. The wrist was the colour of beetroot and ballooning visibly.

“There was a rat under the bed,” he said with effort. “I whacked it with my shoe, but the bloody thing bit me!”

“Let me see,” I said. There were puncture marks in the middle of the darkened area, little more than pinholes. It was not a rat bite. They train boys like me for every eventuality of life in the colonies. I took my pocket knife and made two deep cuts, one either side of the puncture. I sucked at the wound and spat blood while Tommy looked on.

Sams was already at the door in a dressing gown. There had been little noise, but in this place any sound was a commotion.

“Tommy needs a doctor, urgently,” I told him. “Clean the wound with water and don’t let him move.”

“I feel dizzy,” said Tommy.

Sams grasped the situation. He said nothing but nodded assent. More servants were emerging in their night things and milling around like midnight moths, converging on one another to exchange hushed words before separating again. Tommy groaned.

I was convinced Tommy had been bitten by a snake, which was of course impossible. There are no adders in London, except at the Zoo. There is a Sherlock Holmes story where a poisonous snake is released in a bedroom to kill a girl because she threatens the villain’s inheritance. I could not believe anyone would do such a thing in real life, and there was no sign of any snake under Tommy’s bed or anywhere else.

An idea had taken possession of me. I took a candle and padded down to the library in bare feet, careful not to make the slightest disturbance on the stairs. The door was heavy, and when I closed it there was no sound from the house above.

The library was a decent size for a private house. It held little by way of light reading; bound volumes of sermons and an expanse of church history and theology filled most of it, though there was a good range of reference works as well, especially in the field of genealogy. There was no collection of Sherlock Holmes stories, and if Grandfather kept snakes he did not have any books on them unless they were in his study.

I remembered what Tommy had said about my father having books hidden in the library. It was a good place to hide books. Like Poe's purloined letter, a book could be hidden in plain view, so long as the spine was innocuous—it might be hidden among the collections of sermons.

There were far too many books for me to look at individually, but I applied a process of elimination. Obviously, it wouldn't be anything that Grandfather or any casual reader would be likely to remove. It would be something that would require deliberate effort to take down.

The upper shelves could only be reached with the aid of folding steps, stowed discreetly behind the door. I stood them in place and mounted to the top, holding up the candle to light the way. As I suspected, nothing had been dusted at this level for years. There was a thick grey film along the narrow ledge in front of the books. The coating was not quite uniform, though.

I moved the ladder over to the spot a handsbreadth in width where the dust had been disturbed. The book was labelled as J. S. Northcote's *Some Account of the Burial Places of the Early Christians in Rome*, but the contents did not quite fit the cover.

I took the book down and opened it carefully on the table as though it might explode.

Perhaps I had been expecting saucy French lithographs or erotic Indian woodcuts, but this was something else entirely. My father had been a rebel from his youth. Given his own father's oppressive religious tendencies, it was perhaps inevitable that his rebellion would take a blasphemous form. I don't know what the book was called, where he might have bought it, or even what peculiar Eastern language it was in. But I recognised it as a ghastly parody of the Bible. Like an illiterate pagan gawking at an illuminated manuscript, I could only look at the pictures and guess what stories they illustrated. Obscene and violent acts alternated with occult sigils hinting at dark secrets. Men and women, witches and demons were locked in bloody and carnal embraces.

On the fourth page I looked away and shut the book, appalled by its sheer depravity. And I had thought I was sophisticated! This was the

darkest of dark arts, revelling in degradation, dragging the human spirit into the lowest abysses. I couldn't say what that black Bible might teach, but I knew the devil was in it. Perhaps my father drew some comfort in this secret rebellion; but I knew what Sams would think when he found him reading it. No wonder the servants thought there was a curse.

It was tragic that the servants had taken against young Matthew as a result. Perhaps they even tried to harm him. The neglect Aunt Florence had complained about was too extreme to be accidental. The danger had only increased his grandfather's protectiveness, perhaps to the point of murderous jealousy directed against me.

While I was considering this point, my eye fell on a conspicuously modern row of books. Their new bindings stood out against the blackened, leather-bound, gilt-titled volumes.

I moved the candle to a reading table where its light would not be seen beneath the door.

These were the books on the restorative surgery known as the Voronoff Process that my aunt had referred to. They ranged from general medical treatises and collections of academic papers to privately printed works advertising specific treatments. The doctors operating their own clinics claiming to have found the modern fountain of youth all liked to put out something to add a bit of medical verisimilitude.

I had heard of the Voronoff Process. The newspapers called it 'monkey gland transplants,' and there were jokes about ageing movie stars and bankers and their young wives. Since time began, people have been seeking ways of extending their active lives. In 1920 Dr Serge Voronoff announced a new scientific method to do just that.

The first book I picked up had slips of paper for bookmarks. These marked the places about the process changing the lives of the famous, from Kemal Attaturk to the chairman of the Wolverhampton Wanderers football club. Each was more impressive than the last, one quoting from a newspaper:

Mental capacity—memory, planning ability, improvement in ideas, and decision making—were all attributed to his transplant process. Indeed, it was claimed there was a rejuvenation of all the bodily systems including reproduction. Arthritic limbs loosened, carriage became more erect, the skin softened, and wrinkles smoothed away.

The words “including reproduction” were double-underlined in black ink.

Most of the books glossed over details of the process itself. Some merely involved a course of injections with what were coyly referred to as ‘animal extracts,’ but most advocated direct transplant surgery.

The process started with a living ape of some sort, a baboon or chimpanzee. The creature was sedated, and a testicle removed and cut into slivers, which were then surgically inserted into the recipient’s testicles. The ape tissue merged with the human, suffusing it with new youth and vitality—and virility. Men whose sexual powers were flagging were able to father children again.

I looked up just in time to see the door close. It was in deep shadow, but I caught the slight movement and heard the faint click of the latch. I kept looking. Had someone opened the door and closed it again without entering? Or was I no longer alone?

I glanced at each of the titles in turn and skimmed the introduction. My father had been treated in Harley Street, and only one was written by a Harley Street physician, a Dr Clapham-Lee. *A New Method for Restoring Natural Vigour* was a slim book, and only the first chapter had been read. The pages in the rest of the book had not even been cut.

A newspaper clipping fluttered out as I opened it. A former patient was suing Dr Clapham-Lee in a court action. DOC NEEDS BUSINESS was inked on the clipping. BAD PUBLICITY. BARGAIN PRICE DOWN.

The introduction was a rehash of what I already knew. I slit pages with my pocket knife to find the chapter on “How the Clapham-Lee Method Harnesses Nature’s Miracle.”

The present writer is greatly indebted to the late Dr Herbert West of Arkham, Mass. Dr West introduced me to the most remarkable discovery of the age, a solution he sometimes called—with only the slightest exaggeration—“the elixir of life.” For my part, I have only stood on the shoulders of Dr West. Indeed, I stand on the top of his head to reach these heights.

The active ingredient in Dr West’s solution is an extract from the Basiliscus Lazarus, known to the Indians of Panama and Costa Rica as the Mono Esfange or ‘Sphinx Lizard.’ The medicinal use of preparations from the sphinx lizard was discovered long ago by these Indians. According to their beliefs, the lizards are associated with ancient temples to Kulkulcan now overgrown by jungle, and this gives them their curative powers.

These lizards are increasingly rare because of the sums offered for them by Chinese merchants. The Celestials discovered the lizard’s effectiveness in the last century, and they are prized in Oriental medicine, powdered lizard being one of the most valued treatments in their pharmacopeia. Whole dried lizards (generally fakes) are hung up to advertise Chinese apothecaries. As usual, European medical practice has been slow to catch up with the wisdom of the East.

Quite suddenly a head popped up from behind a reading table across the room, a head topped with golden curls that shone in the candlelight. Little Matthew looked at me gravely.

“Hello—you shouldn’t be here, surely,” I said. “Where’s your nanny?”

“You shouldn’t be here either,” he said boldly. The child was used to lording it over ten servants and showed no fear. “Where’s *your* nanny?”

“I’m too big for one,” I said. I glanced down at the book, and when I looked again he had disappeared. “Peekaboo.”

There was a bell pull by the fireplace, but I could hardly summon the servants to collect him. I was not supposed to be in the library—as far as my grandfather was concerned I was not supposed to be in the house. I was

an intruder, and being here was proof of my intent to steal his precious books. I could imagine how satisfied he would be at having an excuse to call the police.

The boy did not reappear. I decided to wait until he wanted to talk.

There is no type specimen of the sphinx lizard, defying naturalists to classify it. This is because of its unusual powers of regeneration. Other lizards can regrow their tails or limbs in the course of days, but the sphinx outdoes them all.

The name is apparently a reference to the Sphinx of Thebes and its famous riddle—"What creature has four legs in the morning, two in the afternoon, and three in the evening?"

Dr West has shown how the sphinx lizard can regrow any organ or body part, including the head. Uncontrolled regeneration is commonplace and renders the adult lizard literally indescribable because each individual is different. Adult lizards are burdened with supernumerary limbs and other appurtenances. The legs may interfere with each other so they are useless, withering away so that the lizard resembles a slow-worm. Multiple tails and even multiple heads are known. Complex integumentary structures resembling feathers may account for native legend associating the lizard with Kulkulcan or Quetzalcoatl; both names mean 'feathered serpent.' Otherwise the lizard may have skin growths or membranes reminiscent of sails, wings, ruffs, or gills, making it a walking compendium of reptilian elements.

Live lizards are vanishingly rare. Dr West's achievement has been to grow a tissue culture from sphinx eggs that can survive and continue growing indefinitely, providing an ever-replenished store of valuable medical material.

"Is your name Paul?"

Little Matthew was watching me from behind a table no more than six feet away. This time his shoulders were revealed and I saw he was naked.

One shoulder was as pale as snow, the other was darkened with a rash or birthmark.

“Yes, I am. I’m pleased to meet you, Matthew.”

He did not approach, but regarded me with big eyes.

“Grandfather says you’re a bastard half-breed.” He tossed the phrase like a playground insult and I did not respond. He added, “Auntie says you’re a poor mite.”

“I don’t think grandfather likes me. He sent me to Canada.”

“When he sends me to my room I don’t go. I go to the kitchen and Auntie lets me have biscuits.”

“You—we—have an indulgent aunt.”

He cocked his head to one side.

“Show me your knife,” he said, as I slit another page.

“I’m using it.”

When I looked up again Matthew was gone. Children show their shyness in different ways.

Previously, the animals chosen for the Voronoff process and related treatments have been selected unscientifically, on the basis of their supposed masculine prowess: stags, rams, and goats. The monkey does at least have the merit of being more biologically compatible with human tissue, and the benefits from it are correspondingly well-documented.

The sphinx lizard is a far more suitable donor. Its powers of regeneration ensure that vigour, vitality, and generation will be transferred to the recipient. The effects of transplants are more pronounced in every way than with other versions of the Voronoff procedure.

We owe much to Dr West for pioneering the technique of culturing of sphinx cells. As well as dispensing with the needs for fresh supplies of the lizard, which are now virtually unobtainable, it also removes the hazards of handling these highly venomous reptiles.

I owe my continued existence to Dr West's treatment of my wartime injuries with his solution. It is only fitting that I should express my gratitude by sharing its benefits with the world.

Matthew popped up on the other side of the table, just a few feet from the candle, his whole naked body illuminated by its yellow light.

I caught my breath. I thought the story about the tail was just a rumour passed round by the servants, or perhaps there might be a stub—not this whip-like extension. Nor was the tail the greatest of Matthew's deformities, if you could call them that.

The rash or change in skin texture started at one shoulder and deepened further down. It broke into squamous patterns of diamonds and triangles and accentuated the irregular angles of his hips. Underneath that skin, the body was misshapen beyond the ugliest of freak shows.

Matthew's legs were mismatched, one abnormally thick and with an extra joint between the thigh and knee, the other bifurcating below the knee and rejoining at the ankle. And yet, like the asymmetry of a flatfish, his body seemed to be an adaptation rather than simple freakishness. And there were other structures—or should I call them growths or organs?—suggestive of something embryonic and still unformed.

It went so far beyond deformity as to be something else. This was not humanity at all, but something from a different order of nature. It was like the hybrids of Greek mythology, a chimera of wholly unrelated elements. Matthew seemed not just unnatural but transcending nature, the child of some other deity.

What in God's name was he? There was nobody to ask, except perhaps Dr Clapham-Lee. What horrible effects had the reptilian extracts produced on him that the doctor wished to inflict on the world as vengeance? How many of these operations had he performed, how many patients like my father had died? How many longed-for children had been born who would gradually warp from angel child into monstrosity?

Grandfather could have no idea of this. Neither Aunt Florence nor the servants would ever dare tell of the boy's progressive condition, deviating

further and further from original humanity. My heart went out to my little brother, victim of cruel destiny.

He looked back at me with cold dislike. It was not the same hatred as Grandfather's, but not so different as all that.

Matthew moved smoothly on his mismatched legs, standing directly between me and the door. Blocking my way out. He was still intent on the knife that I was gripping tightly.

"Tommy will die and they'll blame you," he taunted.

"I don't have any ill-will towards you," I said. "You are my brother."

"Half-brother," he said.

He stood there watching me, his tail flicking about as though it had a mind of its own. His tongue was not forked, at least not yet, but candlelight glinted off long canine teeth. Snake fangs.

"Matthew, we don't have to fight just because you're different," I said. "And I don't want your inheritance—you can keep all of it."

I did not know how much the knife could damage him. I suspected he had sufficient powers of regeneration to recover from any injury short of death. But he still would not like to be hurt.

"It's not because I'm different," he said, as though it was obvious. "It's in the Bible."

"What do you mean?"

"The serpent coupled with Eve. That's why Cain had the Mark of the Beast. He killed his brother Abel to drink his blood."

"That isn't right," I said.

"You're like Grandfather," he said. "He's just a stupid old man. You don't know the real Bible, the secret one."

And he pointed to the book I had left on the table, the one concealed in the covers for Northcote's work on early Christian burials.

"Cain and Abel, Isaac and Jacob, Michael and Lucifer," said Matthew like a nursery rhyme. "The strong drinks the blood of the weaker and gets even stronger. God doesn't do *anything*. He can't."

Having delivered this blasphemy, he smirked like the naughty boy he was, his tail flicking about. How had Matthew even found the book, let

alone understood it? What corruption might it have produced in his young mind? Had that book done to his soul what Clapham-Lee's lizard potion had done to his body—or worse?

Now I was scared of him, truly scared for the first time. Before, I trusted our common bond of blood. Now I was not so sure.

Matthew slid forward to the other side of the table, with the candle between us. He seemed transfixed by the sight of the dancing flame, guttering a little now as the candle burned low.

They say all animals are afraid of fire.

The candle flame between us was what was keeping him back, not the knife. Being burned was what he really feared. He might recover from other injuries, but he was afraid of the flames. When Hercules fought the hydra, he cauterised the stumps of severed heads with a torch to prevent them growing back.

And here we were, in a room full of flammable paper, and a book in my hand, and a flame in front of me.

Even if I had to burn down the library, the entire house, I could get out alive. If I could keep the fire between this vindictive, venomous child and myself, open a window and escape.

Matthew leaned forward and blew out the candle.

The eternal darkness of Eden enveloped us. My brother advanced to embrace me.

Red Walls

MARK HOWARD JONES

Mark Howard Jones was born in South Wales on the 26th anniversary of H. P. Lovecraft's death. He is the editor of the anthology Cthulhu Cymraeg: Lovecraftian Tales from Wales (SD Publishing, 2013) and the forthcoming Cthulhu Cymraeg II. His latest Lovecraftian fiction appears in the anthologies Black Wings III, The Madness of Cthulhu 2, and Gothic Lovecraft (Cycatrix Press, 2016). He lives in Cardiff, the capital of Wales.



HE AIR IS TOO THICK TO BREATHE. OR THERE IS TOO MUCH of it, and coming at him too fast. He has woken far too suddenly. Yet he doesn't remember even falling asleep.

To his horror, he is in mid-air. Flying along at an enormous speed, his mind races to match his velocity. He must have been in an air crash, he reasons. No, he hates flying. He has never flown—not until this moment.

Cries reach his ears. He strains to look around him. All is milky white, like some child's idea of heaven. But there are people in the clouds; not sitting on them but being hurled along at high speed, like him. Some cry out and try to twist in the air, limbs flailing. It is hopeless. Others seem half-conscious.

He is in the centre of a storm made of people. Suddenly a huge dark shape jumps out of the murkiness. He is going to hit it! There is no way to avoid it. He is staring at his own death.

Then a young woman intercepts his trajectory, moving in front of him, screaming. He hears her ribs crack within her as his body slams into hers, winding him. They hit the hard surface, her head making an awful cracking sound as it cushions his own.

She falls away below him and he tumbles head over heels, falling for what seems like far too long. He lands heavily on his back with a loud grunt, and blackness closes over him for a moment as he cracks his head against another bone-hard object.

When the light returns, he raises his head, gasping for air. She saved him. But for what? This life bought at the cost of another's. Alive. But dying still.

He lies on his back, stunned. His lungs strain against the ribs that cage them too tightly. Above him is a poisoned sky of red and grey. A hungry sky. The stench of decay, blood and opened bodies is choking.

Struggling against piled torsos, he forces himself to his feet. Gazing about him, he sees a field of human wreckage. No one still lives. He staggers backwards, heavily dancing across the obscenely stitched quilt of corpses.

His mind reels at the numbers. There must be thousands stretched out on every side of him. And more arrive each minute.

Around him more bodies fall, adding to the undulating heap of corpses. He catches a movement over to his left. Someone has just landed hard with an audible grunt. Making his way awkwardly towards the man, he sees that he is still moving but is lying face down. "Hey. Hey! Are you all right?" he calls, thinking the sound of his voice might give the man some hope, just as he is clinging to his own small scrap.

Reaching the figure, he leans forward to turn the man towards him. "You're alive. You're going to be OK," he pants, hauling at the man's jacket, rolling him over. He pulls at the lapels, finally able to gaze down into the face. "Hey..." The man's ruined face lets forth one final bestial croak, then he is dead.

As he grasps the man's clothing a song from *The Wizard of Oz* strays across his mind; the man is not merely dead, he's really quite sincerely dead. His mind revolts at its own dark absurdity. He drops the fresh corpse he is clutching and lets out a cold, bitter laugh; one that is close to hysteria.

His skin formiculates and a trembling begins inside. He begins to scratch his arms. But even after several minutes his skin refuses to stop crawling. His senses are screaming inside his skull. Taking deep breaths, steady and long, he forces himself to become calm. Or calmer, at least. It has to be some form of shock, he thinks.

Standing at the centre of the carnage, he holds his breath for a moment. He wonders if all these people have been thrown away because they are deficient in some way. He cannot imagine what that deficiency

might be. As he is obviously also on the reject pile, he realises it would be one of dozens of things. No point in speculating.

Hoping to spy a way out of the madness, he steels himself to climb a small pile of bodies that have fallen on top of one another. For a moment he hesitates—he'd want to be treated with more respect if he was lying there. But then he was already walking over a pavement of people. He has no choice.

Once atop the miniature mountain of lumpen human meat, he sees no escape from the despair. From his vantage point he can see that the bodies are of all shapes, ages, and nationalities, some naked, some still clothed. All these dead dreams—lost hearts that harboured empty hopes, now leaked away.

Clambering down once more, he struggles to stay upright. He averts his gaze when it meets the still-bright eyes of a small face.

Above him, more people are hurtling through the sky to their demise. As they fall, he tries to struggle away from the rain of death, fearing that if one falls on him he will become trapped or, worse still, buried alive. Even here, he still fears that. Something heavy lands near him, sending some of the bodies sliding his way or rolling past him. He staggers sideways, then is knocked off his feet, his leg touching something sticky as it slides into a cavity between several corpses. Pushing against them, he struggles to free himself, succeeding only in dislodging more corpses. Somehow their motion allows him to get his leg free, his knee coming to rest on the back of a small girl.

Wobbling upright, he stumbles forward, nearly falling across the naked body of a middle-aged Asian woman, her plump buttocks pointing upwards as if presenting herself to a lover. Her scent is strong. He feels deeply ashamed at becoming aroused by the sight of her in this facsimile of hell.

Struggling to empty his mind, he looks up. They tower above him like two leaves of a gigantic open book, set at an obtuse angle to each other. Covered in detritus and bits of the wreckage of humanity, the walls are black in places but overall they are red. Painted red by death.

He guesses that they must be measured in miles rather than feet. He lowers his gaze and peers into the distance, first in one direction and then the other. They must have an end, surely? If they do, it is hidden from him in the mist that gathers over the piled-up corpses. He is unsure whether they stand here alone or are the outer wall of some gargantuan structure.

Every few minutes a dozen more bodies crash into the walls at a frightening speed. Few have time to cry out: like him they must be awakening in a state of shock, with no time to make sense of the terrible fate that is rushing towards them. There is very little sound, in fact. The sound of bodies slapping against the wall is a pathetically flat noise. The ending of someone's life deserves a more significant sound than that, he thinks.

His survival, he now sees, was due to the fact that he and his unfortunate, accidental companion had hit the wall quite low down. A fall from a greater height would certainly have killed him. Those hitting the walls higher up are falling farther out across this plain of the dead. Some even disappear into the mists before falling.

He pulls off his tie and opens his shirt. The sticky heat of fading life rises from the mountain of cadavers, the recently deceased shedding the last warmth they have to give. The stench makes him gag several times, but he manages not to vomit.

There was so much broken in his life, so much that was wrong with him, but he doesn't deserve this. Nobody does.

Too often he has settled for a walk-on part in his own life. It has been a strictly non-speaking part. His voice is never heard. He racks his brain to think of something left undone for which he might be judged so harshly. Something or someone knows there are a million tiny things that, added together, would be enough to crush his hopes.

He feels as if the few good things in his life have been incinerated in front of him, then the ashes have been spat into and rubbed in his face.

* * *

Dread alone has so far prevented him from imagining what might be next. Because there must *be* a next. This is not an end for him, unlike those around him. They must all be here for a *reason*, surely.

Then he realises what is missing. There are no flies. Not a single fly in this stinking butcher's shop. That doesn't make sense—except if it is a feast so jealously guarded that not even flies, or their greedy white offspring, are invited. Where is this place?

Is this hell? Has history finally ended, he wonders; has Judgment Day come and found everyone wanting?

Or maybe this is someone's—or something's—idea of heaven. If he is right, then the mind that conceived it must be rotted away with disease.

Maybe it is a monument. Or an altar to a foul religion, with an obscene dark god that requires constant sacrifice. Except for him.

But perhaps this is his curse: he was *supposed* to survive, he was *supposed* to see this. Those who died were the lucky ones. Oblivion. Maybe that is heaven.

A hundred hooks inside his mind, pulling him in all directions at once. The walls beckon. Just one last effort, one final moment of courage, and he can join the fortunate dead who lie all around him. He hopes he can summon enough speed, heading out over this nightmarish surface, to smash his brains out against the hard surface. He can stand no more of this.

Rushing forward as best he can, he is just feet from the dark hard salvation of the wall when he sinks to his knees in failure. He curses himself, aware that his own cowardice has cheated him of the mercy that oblivion would have brought. He is disgusted that he has been unable to overcome the simple-minded brute within him who wants to go on living, no matter what the consequences might be.

Shutting his eyelids tightly and praying to whatever foul god might be listening, he pleads for the towering walls to come crashing down on him and all the filth beneath them. At least that would obliterate the memory of this obscene situation. If only there was that much mercy here.

He slumps down against three large men piled atop each other and sobs heavily.

* * *

Some time later, he forces himself to stand and face the wall. The fact that this giant obstacle is an execution device appalls him, yet he longs to know more about it.

Finally he gathers enough tatters of courage together and reaches out to touch the wall. His fingers hesitate, defying his will once more. Despite the rivulets of hot blood streaming over most of it, a coolness rises from the surface where the black shows through.

Gritting his teeth, he forces his fingers forward. The surface does not yield beneath his touch, but the cool clamminess is a shock. Snatching his fingertips away from the surface, he knows it is not stone. But it is not anything else his touch is familiar with.

He staggers back from it, fearing that it might not have been built at all but has grown there, a fungoid architecture of death nourished plentifully by blood and human flesh.

He staggers and stumbles away from the terrible, towering edifice.

* * *

Once every hour there is a giant lurch, as of some great machinery, and the sea of corpses descends, making way for more. He totters, trying to surf the wave of decay.

Every time this happens, a noise like razor-angels burns from ear to ear, straight through the soft grey centre of his head, jolting the mush within. He covers his ears, but the sound is tenacious and refuses to let him go. Whether it is the complaint of old machinery in agony or the triumphant bellow of some unimaginable creature, it is impossible to say. The sound transforms its 20-second duration into a black eternity.

Once the sound fades, he stands panting. Exhausted, thirsty. There is no food here and no water. This place was not made for visitors. He is deeply ashamed that, twice now, he has raised his head, opened his mouth, and drunk in the rain of fresh blood that never stops falling.

* * *

Wandering back and forth, he looks for a familiar face among the corpses. An impossible task.

And he catches himself asking why he wants that anyway—it will simply add to his anguish. But at least it would be something familiar, something he recognises and can hang on to. Something to help him cling to the last thin sliver of sanity. Anything is better than nothing.

After what seems like an eternity of staring down into the thousand faces of human mortality, he abandons his insane quest.

He looks down at himself. After just a few hours stranded in this place he looks like a ruddied scarecrow. His clothes are torn and stained with filth and blood. For the first time in his life—if he is still truly alive—personal vanity becomes overly important to him. He tries to rearrange his tattered clothes. He spits into his hand and tries to remove some of the dirt that has gathered there. After a minute or so he gives up his task, realising his vanity is all in vain.

* * *

Somewhere above the red mist, in the sky over the blood-soaked clouds, he sees a vast dark shape moving. Instinct takes over and he tries to flee back to the wall, tumbling over the tangle of tortured limbs, staggering gratefully to safety. Safety? He almost laughs out loud at the absurdity of the concept.

He has no idea what the shape might be. But even if it is a predator of some sort, there is carrion a-plenty here to assuage its hunger. Supposing it did swoop on him and devour him—that would be a merciful release from this larder in hell. He shouts. Incoherent noises, for what good is language here? He waves his arms in a desperate, idiotic attempt to attract this imagined saviour. But none comes.

His head slumps onto his chest. Eventually his mind will snap, he feels sure. But how much more terrible can it be to remain sane in a place like this? Whatever path he travels down, his eventual destination is death.

He starts as he catches some movement in the corner of his eye. A face. A human face. Smeared in filth and blood, two tear-reddened eyes stare at him from the distance. He is sure it is a woman. The head disappears from view. He thinks at first she might be hiding in misplaced panic at seeing another living being, but then convinces himself she has simply stumbled.

Heading in her direction, he clambers over a raised pile of dead, pushing aside the face of an elderly man—smashed glasses, smashed teeth, gaping round mouth—and sees her kneeling there.

“Hello! Hello!” His cries make the woman look up. There is fear in her face. Maybe she’d thought he was an hallucination. “It’s OK. Don’t be afraid,” he says, sliding and stumbling towards her.

She still seems unsure. Maybe she thinks he’s responsible for causing this carnage. “I’m a friend,” is all he can think to say. “It’s good to see someone else,” he adds. Her face relaxes slightly at his words.

As he draws near to her, his foot gives way beneath him and he grabs at her for support. She recoils, screaming. As she stands lopsidedly, panting with pain, he notices that her left arm has more than one elbow. “Sorry... sorry-sorry... I didn’t—” he tenders his apology in a low murmur.

Looking around for something that might help, he quickly realises that there is nothing he can use to set her shattered arm. There is no help here.

As the pain in her arm slowly subsides, she takes a step towards him. At least another living face, one that doesn’t stare back with hollow dead eyes, is welcome. She puts her arm on his and looks up into his face. “Where... ?” she gasps dryly. He shakes his head.

“IdunnohowIgothere... I dunnohow...” She lets the string of syllables slip from her lips like drool, her eyes darting back and forth from his face to the corpses lying all around. “Will anyone come for us?” she whispers, almost afraid of the answer.

The question drenches him in despair. He can’t think of any way to tell her of his greatest fear: that mankind has been reduced to the plaything of some chaotic, chthonic god. That soon there might not be anyone left to care.

He looks at the vast dark walls, clamping his eyes shut as the latest arrivals appear in the air above them. "They'll come... but they won't live."

She gasps, partly in anguish and partly from a twinge in her arm, then buries her face in his chest.

They cling closely to each other; a broken, bloodied Adam and Eve in their charnel pit Eden. Soon they will grow hungry together...

* * *

Crashing into red walls. This storm of people, never ending. Under the feral sky.

The Organ of Chaos

DONALD TYSON

Donald Tyson was born in Halifax, Nova Scotia. He began to write professionally after finishing university and has pursued this career single-mindedly for the past forty years. His short stories have appeared in Black Wings II–IV, Searchers After Horror, and the Weird Fiction Review. A pair of novellas under the title The Lovecraft Coven was published in 2015 by Hippocampus Press. He lives in Cape Breton with his wife, Jenny, their American bulldog, Ares, and their Siamese cat, Hermes.

1



ERGEANT EMMA LOWE STOOD IN HER STIRRUPS AND surveyed the town that lay spread across the floor of the green river valley below. Her dust-covered face was made of lean, hard planes and the slits of her gray eyes were like polished steel. She sat back in her saddle and unclenched her jaw.

“I don’t like the look of it.”

Corporal Lamar Millar tried not to laugh, but some of it escaped through his nose in what sounded like a snort.

“What’s so funny?”

“You always say the same thing, Sarge, every new town we come to.”

“Yeah? Well this time I mean it. It’s too orderly. I’ve got a bad feeling.”

“Orderly’s good,” Millar said. “It means all the Level Nines and Eights are dead.”

Lowe didn’t answer. She sat studying the town for another minute or so.

“Let’s get this over with,” she murmured.

Flicking her reins, she urged her horse forward with her heels. They descended the broken remnant of a road through the weeds. Here and there, bits of asphalt were still visible.

Across the shattered land that had once been called America most of the road surfaces were gone, but the road beds beneath them were still the best way to get from one place to another. It always surprised Millar to see how much of the infrastructure remained after the passage of eighty-three

years. Most of the buildings in this town they were riding into had been built before the Craze, and they were still standing. Granted, some colorful alterations had been made. He squinted at the roof of the nearest house that caught the sun with dazzling panels of blue and green and red, and finally realized that the roof was covered with old automobile hoods. They had been used like giant shingles. He smiled and shook his head at the crazy ingenuity of it. The madders were not unresourceful.

Lowe reined her horse to a stop in front of the house with the car-hood roof, which was some distance outside the town. An old woman in a dirty purple dress sat in a chair on the front porch. At first glance Millar thought she had no legs. Then he realized they were folded up under her dress, like the legs of a toad. No normal human being could hold her legs that way. She must be a deviant, probably born right after the Craze to judge by her age. Her gray hair hung long and rank to her shoulders, and her fat cheeks around her mouth were streaked with something that resembled axle grease, but was probably just dirt that had been there for a long time.

“What the name of this town?” Lowe demanded in her habitual military tone of command. Millar wondered if she was even aware of using it.

The old woman spat without turning her head. The gobbet cleared the lower step and landed in the weeds.

“Used to be called Summervale,” she said in a surprisingly clear voice. “Lately the fools have taken to calling it Purgatory.”

Lowe glanced at Millar. The name suggested religious fanaticism. They had been encountering more and more of that since entering into the region once known as Pennsylvania.

“Who’s the leader of the town?” Lowe demanded.

“There’s no leaders here, you smart-mouthed bitch.”

“There’s always a leader. Who runs things? Who gives the orders?”

The old woman shrugged and twisted her broad mouth.

“Lately, the Preacher been telling people what to do. But we got no leaders.”

“Does this preacher have a name?”

“He calls himself Judas.”

“Fine. Where do we find the Reverend Judas?”

The old woman threw back her head and cackled.

“Where do you think you’d find a preacher, bitch?”

A kind of grunting noise came from inside the house through the screen door, which was patched all over its sagging surface with random bits of thread and wire.

“What’s that?” Lowe asked.

“Expect that’s my pig. She got a bad stomach.”

Lowe looked at Millar.

“Anything you want to ask?”

He quirked a grin.

“You’re joking, right, Sarge?”

As they started to ride away, the old woman jerked her hands from under her arms and spread her fingers.

“Shit, look at that,” Millar said, working his reins to bring his startled horse under control.

Her fingernails were six or eight inches long, and coal black. They had not grown crooked the way long fingernails sometimes do, but were gently curved and resembled the talons of a bird of prey.

“You’re going to die,” the old woman shouted. “Both you little gun-toting pissants are going to die.”

She began to babble and roll her bloodshot eyes at the sky while waving her taloned hands in a geometric pattern that almost looked ritualistic.

“Fucking deviants creep me out,” Millar muttered.

“You and me both, kid,” Lowe said.

The scene as they entered the town looked normal enough, on the surface. That was often how it looked. They had been through enough towns since leaving New Chicago not to be deceived by initial appearances. As they continued down the dusty main street, cracks in the façade began to appear. A woman wandered naked, talking to herself. A child whose head was twice as large as it should have been, and the wrong

shape, pushed himself along in a rusting red wagon using two sticks. Where his legs should have been, there were only short pink appendages that resembled flippers. In the mouth of an alley lay the rotting and fly-infested corpse of a man. Someone had stolen his shoes, and both his feet had been gnawed off, probably by animals, but no one had cared enough to move the body.

“Looks pretty typical to me,” Millar said under his breath.

“Just wait for it. I’ve got a bad feeling.”

“You’ve always got a bad feeling.”

He occupied himself by checking the rooftops for snipers. It was not likely there were any in a town such as this. Even so, it paid not to take anything for granted. He could get his rifle from its sling on his back to his shoulder in under a second, but he did need that second.

More than eight decades after the Craze, the scarred land had settled into a kind of normalcy. Almost all the Level Nines and Level Eights were dead. They were the uncontrollables, and were too violent to survive for long. There were still a few high-functioning Level Sevens around, but among the new generation being born there did not seem to be anything higher than a Level Six. This gave hope that whatever had caused the Craze was slowly wearing off, or at least diminishing.

The Craze had hit hard. Almost overnight, ninety-nine percent of the world’s human population had gone insane. The affliction was not uniform. It ranged from the raving, homicidal insanity of the Level Nines to the mild delusions of the Level Ones. It is possible the world might have found a way to adapt to it, given a little time, but the nuclear warheads fell only three days after the Craze. They wiped out three-quarters of the population of what had once been the United States of America within a few minutes. Millions more died of radiation poisoning or starvation over the ensuing months, while the madness continued to rage unchecked.

The few who were sane and those whose insanity was mild enough to control most of the time began to coordinate and rebuild. It was discovered that children born after the Craze were often deformed in strange ways, but whether this was caused by the Craze or the radiation, no one claimed to

know. The term “deviant” was adopted for those who were born different, and because so few normal human beings remained, they were accepted. Most of the population settled in small farming or fishing communities, as their forefathers had done centuries ago.

Technology was gone, no more than a dim memory in the minds of the elders. But slowly the Level Zeros, or norms as they were called, came together from all across the land that had been America in the city known as New Chicago, and began the patient, difficult task of rebuilding civilization. They sent out scouts to assess the conditions and count the inhabitants of the towns and villages that were scattered all across the crater-scarred landscape.

Lowe and Millar were one such scouting party, and they were a long way from New Chicago.

2



HE CHURCH WAS EASY TO FIND: IT WAS NEAR THE center of town. At some point in its recent history a decision had been made to paint it black from its foundation stones to the tip of its shingled spire. Millar remembered spotting the spire from the hill, but had not realized that it belonged to a church. Black was not the common color for churches, even in these strange times.

On the side of the church beside the front doors, where a cross had probably hung at one time, was affixed a large triangular shard of broken glass. It was big enough and thick enough that it had probably come from the shattered plate-glass window of a store. It was painted black on its underside, so that it presented a shiny black mirror to the world.

“Whatever we’re worshipping, I don’t think it’s Jesus,” Millar murmured under his breath as they climbed the steps.

The double doors were heavy oak, but they were not locked. Just as they pulled the doors open, a wave of sound washed over them. It was loud

and unlike anything Millar had ever heard: metallic and discordant, but strangely blended in a way that was almost musical.

Lowe said something. Her voice was drowned out by the extended chords of sound. The pitch was so deep it made Millar's teeth vibrate and his chest shake.

"What?" he shouted.

The wall of sound momentarily ceased.

"I said, choir practice," Lowe shouted back.

He grinned his lopsided grin. It had taken him almost a year to realize that Lowe had a sense of humor. It was a kind of wit so dry and so understated, it usually passed right over the heads of most who heard it. Millar had come to enjoy it.

The interior of the church gave demonstrable proof that there was a thin line between genius and madness. Above the ranks of oak pews stretched a complex spiderweb of steel wires and cables of varying lengths and thicknesses. They crossed and interlinked and converged on a space above the eastern end, where a stage had been built in place of the altar. About a dozen men and women sat on the rafters or stood on top of ladders among the wires, holding hammers and things that resembled the bows of bass fiddles.

A tall, slender man stood on the stage, robed completely in black like a Jesuit priest. He raised his arms. The others began to draw their bows over the wires, or tap them with their hammers. The church filled with discordant noise that was a mingled humming, clanging, and metallic shrieking.

Millar noticed that each wire was connected at its end to a hammered disk of steel or brass. The disks were dish- or bowl-shaped, and surrounded the space above the stage. Some of them were no larger than dinner plates, while others were six feet or more in diameter. He realized they must serve as sounding boards to amplify the vibrations of the wires. It was these metal disks that generated the noise, or music, whichever it was.

The preacher saw them and made a motion with his hands that cut the sound off. Everyone stared down at them in silence. The disapproval was so

thick, Millar could almost feel it beating against his skin. Or maybe that was the residual effect of the sounds of the wires. It was only then that he noticed another glittering shard of black glass high in the air above the stage. Like the one on the front of the building, it was in the shape of an elongated triangle. It almost resembled the blade of a gigantic black dagger and gave off a sense of menace as it twisted slowly from its support wire.

“What do you want?” the preacher demanded.

“We’re looking for the Reverend Judas,” Lowe said.

“You found him. What do you want?”

Even his hair and eyes are black, Millar thought. But not his skin. His face was as pale as a corpse.

“We’re from New Chicago.”

“Never heard of it.”

“We’ve been sent here by the provisional government of New Chicago to take a census of all the communities in this region,” Lowe explained patiently. “We just need to ask you a few questions about your town, and we’ll be on our way.”

He stared at her with an unreadable expression on his long face.

“You have a most unusual voice. Are you a singer?”

“I don’t sing, no,” Lowe said. “If you would give us an hour of your time —”

“Are those the uniforms of the provisional government?” There was irony in the preacher’s voice.

“These are the uniforms of the Free Army of the United Territories,” Lowe told him coldly.

Millar found himself squaring his shoulders and standing straighter. They were both proud of the gray uniforms they wore, and the principles of discipline and honor they represented.

“You’re soldiers. I judged as much by the weapons you carry on your backs. We allow no guns in Purgatory. We have no use for your kind here.”

He turned his back on them and walked away across the stage. Lowe came forward into the middle of the church, and Millar followed, his eyes

darting around cautiously. They were too exposed. He felt it as a tightness in his gut.

"You can't dismiss us that easily. We have a job to do," Lowe said.

Judas did not turn. He raised his right hand, made a fist, and pulled it down sharply.

"Sarge, look out!" Millar shouted. He started to unsling his rifle from his shoulder.

Lowe turned with a scowl of annoyance still on her face. He saw one of the hammers glance off the side of her head, and she went down like a sack of rags. Something flashed past his nose. Something else hit him hard in the hip. His skull rang like a bell, and a brightness exploded in summer lightning at the back of his eyes.

3



WHEN MILLAR REGAINED CONSCIOUSNESS, THE FIRST thing he saw was Lowe bending over him. The short brown hair at the side of her head was matted with dried blood. He reached up to touch it without thinking.

"Lie still," she said gently. "You took a nasty hit to the back of the head."

He realized he was lying on the narrow lower cot of a steel bunk bed bolted to a wall of concrete blocks. The bare springs of the upper bunk were four feet above his face. He felt the crown of his head gingerly. There was a bump on his scalp the size of a hen's egg.

"Where are we?"

Lowe looked around.

"If I had to guess, I'd say the town jail."

He lifted his head from the thin mattress—there was no pillow—and winced as his pounding headache began to thud more insistently inside his

skull. His eyes did not want to focus, but past the toes of his boots he saw flat steel bars that were painted an ugly green.

"How long have we been here?"

"I've been awake for about two hours. They took my watch, so I can't tell you how long we were unconscious. They took everything."

"I should have been more cautious," he said, remembering the hammers in the hands of the men and women sitting on the church rafters and balanced on the tops of the ladders.

"We walked into it, all right," she agreed.

"Why did they attack us?"

"Why do the madders do anything?"

It was one of the stock questions shouted at new recruits by drill sergeants. He answered in the usual way.

"Because they're all insane, Sarge."

"It's my fault," Lowe said. "I should have approached the church more cautiously. It's obvious that it's the center of the religious cult we've encountered in the last two towns. The cult is growing."

"The cult of the black triangle," he murmured. She raised an eyebrow and he shrugged. "That's what I call it, anyway."

"The preacher in the last town wouldn't talk to us, and the one in the town before that was so crazy, he didn't make any sense."

"He kept yelling about the convergence of dissonance and the transcendent sublimation of the primal chords," Millar said. "It didn't make any sense at the time, but I guess that's what we heard in the church."

"Music seems to be an important part of the cult dogma."

"I wouldn't call it music," Millar said.

"We should have stayed longer in the last town and tried to learn more about this cult. I've got a feeling it's important."

He raised his head again and looked through the bars of their cell. There was no movement in the corridor beyond, which was illuminated by two flickering oil lamps in brackets on the wall.

"What do you think they'll do to us?"

She shrugged.

"Maybe they just want to talk to us to make sure we're not a threat to them."

He knew her well enough to know she didn't believe her own words.

"Do you think this preacher Judas is a madder?"

"Probably a Level Seven. But he has it well under control."

He lay back on the pillow.

"Shit, Sarge, we are so screwed."

The planes of her face betrayed no emotion.

"Stay alert, soldier. Stay ready. When your chance comes, grab it. Get the fuck out of here and make your way back to New Chicago. The president needs to know what's going on in this region."

"We're both going back," he said.

"Maybe," she murmured. "Just remember what I told you."

It was an hour or so later when they heard a metal door somewhere at the end of the corridor clang open and approaching footsteps echo on the concrete floor. The Reverend Judas came into view, followed by two scowling men who wore drab black clothing. Both men had facial deformities. A growth of some kind drooped down from the forehead of one of them, partially covering his left eye. The other had a hair lip.

Lowe stood to confront them through the bars. Millar tried to stand beside her, but had to sit back down on the bunk with his head between his hands.

"Let us out of here," Lowe demanded.

"In good time," Judas said quietly.

"You have no right to hold us. We did nothing."

"You profaned a holy place with your weapons."

"The church doors were unlocked. How were we to know we were forbidden to enter?"

He cocked his head to the side as she spoke and seemed to be listening to something no one else could hear. There was a faint smile on his lips.

"If you continue to detain us there will be repercussions from New Chicago."

"Why did you ride into Purgatory?"

"I told you: we are conducting a census for the provisional government."

"Were you sent here to spy on my church?"

"We didn't even know your church existed until we saw it."

"You're lying," he snapped. "There are churches of the faith in Regret and Sorrow."

Those were the names of the last two towns they had surveyed. Like Purgatory, they had recently been renamed.

"How did you know we passed through those towns?" Lowe asked.

Judas put a hand behind his ear and cocked his head, striking a theatrical pose.

"The voices of the winds whisper secrets down the wires. You can hide nothing from me, woman. I see your filthy soul cowering inside your prison of flesh."

"You've got a short-wave radio, don't you?" Lowe said. "You knew in advance we were coming."

"All things are known to the heralds of chaos," he said in a ringing preacher's voice.

"Is that what you worship? Chaos?"

"What else is real in the world?" He spread his arms. "All this that you see—these walls, this floor, these bars—are illusions created within your mind to imprison you. The mind of man is limited and flawed. It can create nothing but falsehoods. Only chaos is beyond conception by the mind of man, and only the inconceivable is real in its perfection."

"What are the black triangles? Do you worship them?"

He reached into his pocket and drew forth a gold cross on a fine gold chain. He held it up for her to see. Millar realized it was the gold cross Lowe always wore around her neck.

"This is a symbol of your pale and craven king of the dead. Do you worship it?"

"No. The cross represents the resurrection of the Son of Man."

He tucked the cross back into his pocket.

“The shards of darkness represent the angles of chaos who come to cleanse the world of sin.”

“Angles? Do you mean angels?”

“Enough,” he said, his black eyes flashing. “You shall not question our faith again.”

He turned to the silent men who stood behind him.

“Take her for interrogation.”

Millar stood from the bunk and tried to put himself in front of Lowe, but the dizziness in his head sent him to his knees on the concrete floor before the deviants even reached him. They pushed him aside and took Lowe by the arms. She did not resist.

“Remember what I told you,” she said to Millar as she was pulled out of the cell.

He stumbled to his feet and managed to reach the door just as it was slammed shut.

Judas turned a key in the door’s lock, sliding its bolt into place.

“We’ll question you when you’re feeling better, son,” he said in a voice that was almost fatherly.

“If you hurt her, I’ll blow your brains out, you crazy son of a bitch.”

Millar lunged through the bars for the preacher’s throat, but the other man slid back so adroitly that only one of Millar’s fingers hooked in the pocket of his robe. The pocket tore and Judas knocked his hand away with a flash of annoyance.

“Don’t be in such a rush, son,” he said. “Your time will come, I promise you.”

He left the corridor. The slam of the iron door behind him had a note of finality.

In the fluttering lamp light, Millar saw something gleam on the floor. He knelt and reached through the bars to pick it up, then sat holding it on his palm so that the light reflected from its polished gold. He had often seen Lowe’s cross hanging around her neck, but this was the first time he had touched it. He brushed its smooth surface with the tip of his finger.



THE INTERROGATION ROOM WAS NOT FAR AWAY, NOT nearly far enough away, from the cell where Millar lay with his arm across his eyes and his teeth clenched, listening to Lowe's screams. There was no way to judge the passage of time, but the screams must have gone on for hours. After a while, he realized they had stopped, and sat up on the side of the bunk, tense and alert. His headache was not so bad now, and he was able to focus his eyes. If they gave him a chance, he knew he was going to take it.

They never gave him a chance. Three men robed in black entered, but Judas was not among them. Two held an unconscious Lowe between them. The third opened the door with a key, then trained a revolver on Millar while the others threw Lowe into the cell. They locked the door and left.

He half pulled and half lifted the unconscious Lowe onto the bunk, then listened anxiously for her heartbeat with his ear pressed against her small, firm left breast. Her heart was strong and regular.

Her face was bruised, her nose broken. They had beaten her with their fists and burned her with what looked like a heated steel rod, to judge by the ugly red sear marks. His concern shifted to her hands, which were wrapped in clumsily applied windings of gauze soaked with dried blood.

Millar held one hand between his, wondering if he should leave the gauze in place or try to re-wrap it more tightly. In the end, he carefully peeled the gauze strip away layer by sticking layer. When he reached the end, he sat staring in horror.

They had cut off her fingers, all of them, along with her thumb, and then seared the bleeding stumps with the hot iron rod to cauterize the wounds so that she would not die from blood loss.

He felt tears of frustration well into his eyes and angrily blinked them away. He looked at her other hand, afraid even to touch it, but in the end he unwrapped it. Both hands were the same.

The single mercy allowed by fate was that Lowe did not regain consciousness before he finished binding up both hands with the filthy, clotted gauze. When she did come around, her gray eyes snapped open and she screamed. He caught her flailing arms, trying not to touch her hands, and pressed them to her sides. Her whole body shivered and shook as though with a fever, but he knew it was pain that made her tremble.

He stared fiercely into her eyes until she focused on his face, then let go of her arms. She made an involuntary noise in her throat and shuddered, but otherwise lay still. He drew from his pocket the gold cross and held it where she could see it. She blinked and nodded. He raised her head with one hand and looped the chain around her neck. She tried to reach her own hand up to touch the cross, but he gently pressed her arm back down. He tucked the cross into her shirt so that it lay concealed between her breasts. Neither of them said anything. Eventually, she drifted into a sleep of exhaustion.

She was still asleep when they came again. Millar stood defiantly as they opened the cell door. Again, Reverend Judas was not with them.

"I'm ready, you bastards," he said. "Take me and do your worst."

They pushed him roughly aside and dragged Lowe off the bed. She woke and stared around with wild eyes that met Millar's gaze for only an instant. Millar went insane and attacked them. While one of them held Lowe, the other two beat him to the floor of the cell with hardwood clubs and left him there. He heard the doors clang shut behind them.

He had not had any water to drink for more than twenty-four hours, and his head injury had left him weak in the legs, but he managed to push himself to his feet. He stood leaning against the wall, listening with his head cocked and his mouth open to quiet his own breaths, in order to catch the slightest sound from outside the cell. When her screams began, he pressed his palms against his ears and screamed along with her, but it did no good. He could still hear her.

Eventually the screaming stopped. He sat on the edge of the bunk with his head between his hands and waited for them to bring her back, emotions rushing through him that ranged from scarlet rage to black

despair. A man came into the corridor and replenished the reservoirs of the two oil lamps that provided the light. He would not speak to Millar, who cursed him in the way only a soldier can curse.

Millar wondered if the madders and the deviants were just going to leave him in the cell to die of thirst. That was the thing about crazy people: you couldn't predict what they would do, because their motives made no sense. Religious fanatics were always irrational, but these people had been crazy before they found whatever it was they prayed to.

In a way, he wanted them to kill him. It would end his anguish over his inability to help Lowe. The only reason he was on the survey was to protect her, to watch her back, and he had failed her. He had failed his training. He should have known better than to walk into that church without a rifle in his hands. He should have known better than to stand in the aisle under all those madders when he could feel their hatred beating down on them.

At some point, he fell asleep from sheer exhaustion. It was a dreamless sleep. He wasn't even aware of closing his eyes or sprawling sideways across the thin, hard mattress on the bunk. It might have been day or night. He had no way of knowing.

The clank of the door at the end of the corridor woke him in an instant. Before he even realized it he was standing beside the bunks, watching for Lowe. Reverend Judas came into view, followed by the man with the hair lip, who held a revolver in his hand. They stopped in front of the green bars of the cell, and the man directed the muzzle of the gun at Millar's chest.

"They tell me you had a nice long sleep," Judas said in a soothing tone.

"Where is Sergeant Lowe?"

"Don't worry about her, son. We're taking good care of her."

"She's still alive?"

"Naturally she's alive. We have no intention of killing her."

"Why do you keep torturing her?"

Judas pursed his lips and shook his head in sadness.

"It was hard, but it had to be done. Her mind and body needed to be conditioned for the work she must do."

“What are you talking about? What work?”

“You should feel very proud, son. Your sergeant has been chosen to take part in the coming forth of the angles of chaos.”

Millar blinked in confusion.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Sergeant Lowe has been chosen by the Unbodied Kings to sing the litany in the ritual of the coming forth by night of the angles of chaos.”

“Did she agree to this voluntarily?”

“She is reconciled to her task.”

“Reconciled,” Millar repeated, trying to control his anger.

“It’s a great honor, son. Neither you nor the sergeant can realize how greatly you have both been blessed. You did not come to Purgatory by chance. You were led here by exalted intelligences to fulfill your parts in the coming forth of their servants into our universe.”

Millar knew better than to try to make sense out of the ramblings of a madder.

“I’d like to see Sergeant Lowe.”

Reverend Judas chuckled. The man beside him with the gun did not even smile.

“Why else do you think we’re here?”

“You mean you’ll take me to her?”

“Of course. I want you to see for yourself the wonder that your coming to our town has enabled. You are the fulfillment of prophecy.”

“Take me to her now,” Millar demanded.

“Soon. I need to ask you a few questions before we go.”

“What do you want to know?”

“Is it true that you are what is known as a Level Zero?”

“Who told you that?”

“Sergeant Lowe.”

“Yes, it’s true.”

“You were born completely sane? No madness at all?”

“I’m sane.”

Judas nodded and looked satisfied.

“We can use your blood. We have very few sanes in Purgatory.”

“What do you mean, use my blood? Are you going to kill me?”

“Perish the thought, boy. No, we need you alive to sire children on our women. We need to breed more sanes, or Level Zeros as you call them, to help carry forward the great work we have been entrusted with by the Unbodied Kings.”

“Who are these kings? Are they your gods?”

Judas rolled his black eyes upward and seemed to consider.

“I don’t think you would call them gods. No, I don’t believe that is the word you would choose.”

Millar tried to swallow his impatience, but his dry throat would not allow it.

“When are you going to take me to Sergeant Lowe?”

“We’ll go now,” Judas said brightly. He unlocked the door of the cell.

Millar came out slowly, calculating in his mind what he needed to do to disarm the man with the gun and to kill Judas.

“Please don’t do anything violent,” Judas said. “Karl will shoot you.”

Millar looked at Karl. The silent man’s eyes did not waver from his face. They were professional eyes. At some point Karl had done some kind of police work or soldiering. Probably as a mercenary, Millar thought. There were always petty wars breaking out between the territories.

“Let me take you to see Sergeant Lowe,” Judas said, turning his back on Millar. He led the way out of the corridor.

5



IT WAS DARK OUTSIDE THE JAILHOUSE, AND RAINING. A strong gust of wind drove large raindrops against the side of his face like pellets of hail. Opening his mouth, he caught some of them on his tongue. They helped relieve the dryness. He realized that the jailhouse was just across the muddy street from the church. Judas did not pause or

turn, but led him up the church steps and through one side of the double doors, which a man held open against the wind.

The church was illuminated by numerous candles and overflowed with townspeople. They all wore black clothing of various kinds. Their mood was solemn, with an undercurrent of excitement. Millar sensed their expectation. Some of them could not contain themselves. They waved their hands in the air or made grunting noises or rocked back and forth in their seats. The church had a rank animal smell that reminded him of wet horses.

The air above the rows of pews was a three-dimensional spiderweb of wires and cables of different lengths, all terminating in the centers of curved metal dishes that focused down on the stage. Men and women sat on the crossbeams or atop ladders with bows and hammers in their hands. Millar wondered if they were the same group that had pelted him with hammers. All their faces looked the same to him—solemn, fanatical, expectant. Many were deformed.

Every now and then someone would gently tap a wire with his hammer, as though testing its pitch. The air was filled with a metallic hum made up of mingled discordant notes.

Above the stage, within the space defined by the encircling metal dishes, the large black shard of plate glass twisted slowly on its support wire, catching the flickering glow of the candles and sweeping their reflections around the church. The golden light danced across the metal sounding disks and over the wide eyes of the congregation.

The stage was not empty. In the center rested a plain wooden chair without arms or padding. His gaze was drawn to something strange that sat on the stage beside it. It was rounded, about the size of a big pumpkin, and made of hammered brass that gleamed yellow in the candlelight. Something that resembled clusters of brass bells stuck out from both its sides, but they were pointing away from the pews and Millar couldn't see them clearly enough to guess what they were.

As Reverend Judas walked up the center aisle, a low moan of delight arose from the congregation. The murmur of more than four hundred

voices mingled with the subdued pinging and thrumming of the wires. The man called Karl nudged Millar up the aisle with his gun, then stopped him at the front row of pews and pushed him into an empty seat on the left side. He sat beside Millar on the end of the pew, the gun in his hand pointed at Millar's ribs.

Judas turned toward Millar with a satisfied smile on his lips.

"Watch and learn, son. This is your new faith." He leaned closer. "I caution you not to do anything disruptive. The townspeople would tear you into pieces with their teeth and their bare hands."

Millar looked around. The glow of fanaticism in the faces of the men and woman left no doubt that the preacher spoke the truth. The congregation was so wound up with emotion, it was all they could do to remain on their seats. Some were bouncing up and down and clapping as they stared in rapture at Judas.

The preacher mounted the steps to the stage and stood in front of the chair. He raised his palms for silence. The murmur of voices swelled and then slowly diminished to nothing. Even the wires and metal disks above their heads were still. Millar heard the rain beating in wind-driven sheets against the windows of the church.

"We were born from the mud," Judas declaimed in ringing tones.

A murmur of agreement from the pews.

"We were formed in corruption and in darkness."

Another murmur.

"We were shaped with the filth of the earth."

Karl murmured with a slight lisp, "Yes, we were." It was the first time Millar had heard him speak. His eyes shone as he stared up at Judas.

"We were brought forth from the maelstrom of chaos at the center of the universe and framed in chords of disharmony to be imperfect, that we might better serve those who made us."

"Unbodied Kings," someone shouted from the back.

Millar looked around the church, wondering how much more of this madder ranting he would be forced to endure before he was taken to Sergeant Lowe.

Judas raised his hand for silence.

“We, their lesser servants, have but one purpose, and when it is fulfilled we shall be permitted to return to the blissful oblivion of the chaotic vortex, where we will forget the torment of our earthly lives. For we are in hell, my brothers and sisters. We have always been in hell, and the only paradise is annihilation.”

He pointed suddenly into the crowd.

“What is our sole purpose on this earth?”

Millar turned his head. The woman Judas pointed at was struck dumb and began to stammer. Someone near her said “angles.”

“To free the angles of the Kings,” the woman managed to say.

“Correct, sister. Our sole purpose is to open the way for the greater servants of the Unbodied Kings, who will prepare this world for their return. The angles will cleanse this globe with their cold black fire. I have seen it in the visions the Kings sent to me while I wandered this world, unknown and unwanted. They will boil the oceans and level the mountains to the plains. They will burn the forests and dry up the rivers. They will turn the air itself into a deadly mist. When at last the world is purified, the Unbodied Kings will rule here again, as they did countless ages before they shaped us from the filth of the earth to serve them. And then, what of us, my brothers and sisters? What of us?”

He spread his hands and cocked his head, waiting for an answer.

“True death,” someone shouted, and the phrase was repeated: “True death, true death, true death.”

“There is no oblivion in common death, for we return again and again on the wheel of rebirth. Each of us has died and been reborn into this same hell for millions of years. There is no escape from our torment, except by the mercy of the angles, for their cold black fire gives true death and a final return to the vortex of chaos from which we were drawn forth in primordial aeons.”

Murmurs of agreement arose from the congregation, who nodded their heads and rocked back and forth.

“It was for this purpose that the Unbodied Kings sent us the Craze. The blessing of madness enabled us to hear their words spoken inside our heads, to see the visions they sent to us in our sleep, and to know our place in the order of things.”

Millar listened more intently. No one knew the cause of the Craze. It had come from nowhere. Scientists had speculated that it was caused by some invisible gas or dust cloud through which the solar system was passing in its revolution around the galactic core, but no measuring device or test had ever been able to detect such a gas. Was it possible that the Craze had been sent deliberately?

“This church was once a place of worship for the false god of suffering and resurrection, the craven pretender who hung his head and turned his cheek. Men came here to worship and rejoice in their eternal bondage on the wheel of rebirth. But we have transformed it into a temple of devotion to the Unbodied Kings and the shadow angles of liberation. The Kings spoke to us in our dreams and sent us visions, and we built what they commanded us, their faithful servants of corrupt flesh, to build for them.”

He raised his arms and looked up at the web of wires and shining disks above his head.

“It is finished. The final instrument of liberation has been prepared. Tonight, we herald the coming forth of the angles of chaos with their sacred chords and measures.”

He turned to a man who stood at the foot of the stage.

“Bring in the instrument.”

The man left through a side door and in a few minutes came back with two black-robed townswomen, who led a naked woman between them toward the stage. Her slender body gleamed with rain water. It was only when Millar saw the gauze bandages around her hands that he realized it was Lowe. The bastards had shaved off all her hair, even the hair on her pubes and eyebrows. She wore wireframe eyeglasses with round lenses that were the same shiny black glass as the triangular shard that hung suspended above the stage. The light of the candles reflected in their mirror disks.

He started to stand up without thinking, but the men on either side of him were ready. They seized his arms and held him down. He struggled against them for a while, then went limp when he realized there was no way he could drag Lowe out of the church on his own. There were too many madders between him and the doors.

Judas stood to one side of the stage as Lowe was led up beside him. He gestured at the chair. The women in black guided the unresisting Lowe toward it, then pressed her into its seat. They tied her ankles to the front legs but left her arms free.

Lowe seemed to be in some kind of trance. Maybe she's drugged, Millar thought. He hoped so. At least that would be a kind of mercy. He started to call her name, then hesitated. What good would it do?

"Connect the instrument," Judas ordered.

At first Millar could not make out what they were doing. Half a dozen men began to move around the stage on stepladders, gathering in their hands fine wires that dangled from the metal sounding disks and drawing them together toward the chair. It was only when they began to tie fishhooks on their ends that he realized their intention. He jumped to his feet before his captors could grab him.

"Stop this!" he shouted, staring around the church. "You're all insane! Stop what you're doing!"

The congregation murmured its anger, but Lowe did not even turn her head at the sound of his voice. He struggled to break free from the men who grabbed his arms and pulled him back. They were too strong.

Judas frowned down at him from the edge of the stage and pointed his finger like some brooding prophet of judgment.

"You will be silent. Bind his mouth."

The men who held him had the cloth bindings to gag him in their pockets. He tried to resist, but Karl hit him with the revolver on the side of the head, and the strength left his arms and legs. In seconds they had his mouth tightly bound.

He sat and watched in horror as the fishhooks were inserted through various parts of Lowe's naked body, and the wires attached to them drawn

taut so that the hooks pulled at her pale flesh and the metal disks above her vibrated. They put the hooks through her breasts, her sides, her abdomen and lower belly, even through her labia, so that the whole front of her torso was a mass of spreading, gleaming wires.

Reverend Judas stood behind the chair and gently removed her dark glasses. If there had not been a gag in his mouth, Millar would have vomited from the sheer horror of what he saw. They had pricked out her eyes and left only raw, empty sockets. Lowe was completely blind. For the first time, he noticed a small streak of dried blood that had run down from her ear. He wondered if they had also pricked out her eardrums to make her deaf.

Two of the workmen inserted hooks into her eye sockets and drew the wires taut. Small whimpers of pain came from behind Lowe's clenched jaw.

Judas picked up the gleaming brass sphere from the stage. He turned it around in his hands and slowly lowered it over Lowe's head. Millar realized it was some kind of bizarre faceless helmet. It completely enclosed Lowe's head and shoulders, and fitted over the back of the chair so that when it was fastened into place Lowe was held there. Slots in the front accommodated the wires that extended from her eye sockets, but there were no openings for her eyes or her mouth. The things on the sides of the helmet that Millar had mistaken for bells were actually the bell-ends of brass trumpets. Three of them curled around on each side of the helmet, like the curling horns of a ram, spreading and extending forward.

"Call forth the angles of darkness!" Judas commanded in triumph.

The church filled with a sound unlike anything Millar had ever heard. It shook his entire body. The cacophony in the church on their arrival in Purgatory was as nothing compared with this solid wall of clashing, thrumming, metallic dissonance. It did not remain constant, but rose and fell in pitch as bowed and hammered chords of sound merged and crashed into each other like storm waves breaking against a rocky cliff.

And then, something else began that rose above the sounds of the wires. It was a deep lowing of distress, like the lowing of a bull caught in quicksand and struggling to free itself, but many times louder. It came from

the bells of the trumpets on either side of the brass helmet around Lowe's head.

6



EARS STREAMED DOWN MILLAR'S CHEEKS AS THE river of dissonance flowed through his flesh and along his nerves and made his chest vibrate. All he could think about was that he should be the one on that stage, not Lowe. It was his duty to protect her. If he could not do that, why was he even alive?

The lowing of the horns on the sides of the brass helmet was horrifying, but there was a kind of weird and savage beauty as it mingled with the shrieking, banging wires and the ringing of the metal sounding disks. In some way the acoustics of the helmet lowered the pitch of Lowe's shrieks of agony while at the same time magnifying their volume. As she screamed, she flailed with her arms at the wires radiating from her body, and the pain as she struck the wires with her mangled hands redoubled the force of her screams.

Millar wondered if he would still be able to hear when the horrifying juggernaut of noise finally ceased, or if his eardrums would burst and bleed under the assault.

Judas raised his arm and pointed upward. He spoke, but his words were lost in the clashing chords. Millar looked up with the rest of the congregation and saw that something was happening to the air around the black shard of glass, which shimmered and danced as the waves of sound struck it. The air thickened and grew dark. It was not like smoke, but more like a kind of shadow that danced to the discordant symphony of chaos. As he watched, the cloud expanded and darkened so that it was hard to see the glass shard within it.

Something moved inside the shadow. He narrowed his eyes, trying to see it in the uncertain light. It turned and shifted its shape from moment to

moment, but it was three-sided, like the shard of glass. The length of its sides constantly shortened and lengthened as it changed. One moment it appeared to have depth, but a moment later it seemed flat. As the great sounding disks vibrated their wall of noise at it, the moving, morphing triangle detached itself from the glass shard and drifted forward above the heads of the congregation. From its ever-changing edges, fine tendrils of darkness extended themselves out in all directions. Everyone in the church stared at it with rapture, including the men on either side of Millar.

They made a critical mistake, he thought calmly. They gagged my mouth, but they left my arms and legs free.

With one smooth movement he reached to Karl's belly and pulled the revolver from his belt. The world seemed to slow down around him and go silent. Continuing the motion, he shot first the man on his left, then Karl, but he did not even hear the gunshots. He stood up, staring at Judas on the stage. Their eyes locked. Somehow Millar knew that Judas knew what he was thinking.

I have three obvious targets of opportunity, Millar thought in that instant with cold logic, but there is only time for a single aimed shot at one of them before the congregation pulls me down from behind. I can shoot Judas and maybe end his religion. Or I can shoot Lowe and end her suffering. Or I can shoot myself and insure that these bastards will never be able to torture me.

Judas looked into his eyes and smiled, because he knew Millar had chosen a fourth way, and that was to spin around and kill those lunging to grab at him from behind, then make a break for the side door and freedom. There was no escape from Purgatory. Millar saw it in the preacher's black eyes.

So Millar chose a fifth way. He raised the gun and shot the hanging shard of black glass. It split into half a dozen large pieces that rained down on the stage. When it broke, the floating blackness vanished. One piece of glass embedded itself in the top of the Reverend Judas's head. Another fell sideways like a giant knife and cut through the wires attached to Lowe's

torso before shattering into a thousand tiny fragments. The shrieking, groaning discordance of sounds stopped.

Judas staggered in a circle on the stage, batting at the air in front of him. Blood poured from his scalp over his face. The congregation sat in shocked silence, too stunned to move.

“I see them! I see them!” Judas screamed. “They’re everywhere!”

He stumbled off the edge of the stage.

Millar leaped up past his twitching corpse and ran to Lowe. For a few precious seconds he fumbled with the straps that held the brass helmet in place over the back of the chair before he was able to rip it free.

He stepped back and raised the hand that held the gun across his mouth in an instinctive gesture of loathing. In some inexplicable way the strange music of the wires had deformed her head and enlarged it into a bulbous mass of wrinkled, pink flesh that bore no resemblance to anything he had ever seen, or even imagined in his nightmares.

The congregation of lunatics began to recover their wits. Confusion turned to hatred. Hammers rained down on the stage from above. One hit him in the small of the back, but he ignored it. The black-garbed men and women clambered over the backs of the pews toward the stage in their eagerness to reach him, their faces twisted with fanatical rage, and their screams and bellows and barks were like a chorus of damned souls.

He laid his hand on Lowe’s naked shoulder. A shock flashed along his nerves. Somehow, he felt her altered mind running along the pathways inside his brain. Her thoughts were inhumanly powerful, magnified in some way by her ordeal. Without any question or doubt, he knew what she wanted. He pressed the muzzle of the revolver against the bloated pinkness and pulled the trigger.

A hammer glanced from the side of his head and sheered off his ear, making his skull ring like a bell. He ignored the pain as he placed the barrel of the gun into his mouth. Murderous hands grabbed his legs and ankles from all sides. Before they reached his arm he pulled the trigger.

Seed of the Gods

DONALD R. BURLESON

Donald R. Burleson is the author of twenty-three books, including the short story collections Lemon Drops and Other Horrors, Four Shadowings, Beyond the Lamplight, and Wait for the Thunder, as well as four novels.

His fiction has appeared in Twilight Zone, Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, Lore, Cemetery Dance, Inhuman, Deathrealm, Terminal Fright, and many other magazines, as well as in dozens of anthologies, most recently Black Wings, Dead But Dreaming 2, and Horror for the Holidays. His essays on H. P. Lovecraft have been collected in Lovecraft: An American Allegory (Hippocampus Press, 2015). He lives in Roswell, New Mexico, with his writer wife Mollie and numerous cats.



IT WAS A DISMAL PLACE TO COME TO LIVE, THIS dingy, decaying apartment building on a little-traveled side street in a less than attractive section of the city, but then I was between jobs. That's what you say, I guess, when you've lost your job and don't know whether you'll ever find another one. I had some savings, but for the present this wretched little flat was all I could afford.

It was evidently the same with the other tenants, including the man across the hall. He was a seedily attired fellow who appeared to be in his late fifties, rather chubby, with a mop of thin, graying hair often falling across his face like fiddling spider legs that had to be brushed away. His dark eyes were nervous, shifting, as if searching for answers to questions best not even asked. When I first encountered him in the dimly lit hallway, his mouth broadened into a wan smile revealing a set of yellowed, uneven teeth that tended to put me off my feed, especially when his breath was worse than some dogs' I had known. I tried to stand back a bit without seeming to be unfriendly.

"Tom Richards," I said, extending my hand.

"Malcolm Boyle," he replied, shaking hands and pointing to the unpainted door of my apartment. "Saw you moving in this morning."

"Yeah," I said, not sure whether my probably visible chagrin at coming here might be an unkind comment on his own choice of living quarters, or lack of choice. "Have you been here long?"

He shrugged. "Let me see... four, five years. It's pretty quiet here, a lot of the apartments are empty. Old Mrs. Miller downstairs has trouble renting 'em, it looks like. But all in all the place isn't so bad."

"No," I said, "I guess not."

I saw Malcolm only occasionally for a while after that. It was a three-story building, and our apartments were on the top floor, his own door lying across from mine and down the hall a few feet. From time to time he would be coming down the stairs when I was coming up, or I would see him in the hall, entering or leaving his rooms. I gathered he didn't work, as he seemed to spend a certain amount of time, even in the middle of the week, sitting outside on the crumbling concrete steps leading up to the building, idling the afternoon away. As for myself, I was out looking for a job a good bit of the time, but the search wasn't turning up any results to speak of, and so after a while I ended up spending a lot of time around the building too. One afternoon I joined him on the front steps, where a distant rumble of traffic made a kind of hypnotic backdrop to the scene.

Malcolm was sitting with some old book in his lap, picking his teeth with a mangy-looking toothpick. Noticing that I was watching him do this, he looked a little apologetic.

"I have a spot up here in my mouth," he said, "where food gets stuck."

"Mm," I said. "That kind of thing can drive you crazy. Maybe you ought to try some dental floss or something."

He poked around some more with the toothpick. "Yeah, maybe. Seems to be something up in there that just won't come out."

I wished we could talk about something else, so I pointed to the book. "What are you reading?"

Tossing the toothpick aside, he picked the book up and turned it over and over in his hands, as if he were seeing it for the first time, or as if it always looked different no matter how many times he had seen it. It had a cover that looked like some sort of dried animal skin. "This is a very rare old volume. I got it from my grandfather just before he died. It's called *The Book of Ng'lwani*. I've had it for thirty years but only recently started reading it. Nobody even knows who wrote it, but whoever it was, they wrote it a long, long time ago. It has to do with the Old Gods."

I chuckled. "Well, I'm afraid the gods are not my cup of tea. I've been an atheist all my life."

“Oh no, look,” he hastened to say, “I don’t have any conventional religious beliefs either. What this book tells about is—something different.”

My curiosity had been somewhat aroused. “Like what?”

He opened the book. “Let me read you a passage.”

“Okay. Why not?”

He cleared his throat, an unpleasantly phlegm-choked sound, and began reading in a gravelly voice. “*For when the stars come right, then shall the Old Gods plant a seed in one who shall bring forth that which has not been known, but which shall lurk among men to their horror. There is no denying That which is to shamble forth into the light to bring madness and death, for the will of the Old Gods is supreme.*” He closed the book with a dry little snap and sat staring at nothing in particular, as if mulling over what he had just read.

“Cheery stuff,” I said, and got up off the steps. “Look, I’ve got to be going, but we’ll have another chat again soon.” I was beginning to wonder, actually, how often I really wanted to chat with someone who appeared to have a fixation on some kind of primordial gods. I never wanted to have anything to do with supernaturalism in any form. But maybe it wasn’t really so much of an obsession as it sounded; maybe Malcolm was just curious about such things, the way some people have a passing interest in one brand of mysticism or another. Books on palm-reading and pyramid power and astrology do sell, I reflected, however foolish it all is.

At any rate I didn’t see him for a few days after that, though I wasn’t consciously trying to avoid him. He was the only tenant in the building, after all, who had ever spoken more than two words to me. The next time I did run into him was up in the hallway as he was going into his apartment. He didn’t look altogether well; maybe, I thought, it was just the light, but his face seemed to have taken on a vaguely sallow appearance, and I thought he might have lost some weight.

“Are you all right?” I asked.

He shook his head, pointing to his mouth. “Toothache.” Without waiting for me to make any comment, he went on inside and closed his door.

It's odd how common living circumstances can come to suggest a bond of sorts between people who otherwise know or concern themselves very little about each other. I worried about Malcolm Boyle, and I resolved to keep an eye on him while trying not to make a pest of myself in showing my concern. It's a delicate balance sometimes, especially when one hasn't known a person very long. A toothache was no big worry, but as I said, he had looked a bit unwell in the light of that tiny bulb in the dusty hall.

I was tied up with fruitless job-hunting for the following several days, catching sight of Malcolm only occasionally, and even then from too much of a distance to tell how he was looking. So the next time I saw him in proximity was something of a shock.

He was sitting on the concrete steps in front of the building again, and I joined him there. It was a crisp, cool afternoon in late April. When I looked closely at him, I saw that I hadn't been mistaken about the sallowness, which was now more pronounced. But the main thing was that his lower face was noticeably swollen on the left side. It was almost as if he had something about the size of a golf ball in his mouth.

"You must still have that toothache, from the looks of it," I said.

He shook his head. "I'm not sure if it's really what you would call a toothache," he said, his voice somewhat muffled by the swollen contours of his jaw. "Remember I told you something was stuck in my teeth, up under the gums, a piece of meat or something, that I couldn't get out?"

I nodded. "Don't tell me it's still in there. That was days ago."

He nodded in turn. "Something got stuck way up deep in there, in a cavity or a pocket, and I think it's getting infected."

I shook my head. "That's not good, Malcolm. Shouldn't you see a dentist?"

"I can't really do that," he said. "They cost too much."

Again I shook my head in frustration with him. "Don't you know there's a walk-in dental clinic over on 39th Street where they don't charge you a lot? You ought to go there."

He shrugged and rose to go inside. "Oh, I'll see if I can take care of it." I wasn't sure what he meant by that, but I had my doubts that he would

indeed go to the clinic. “Besides,” he added, “I’m not sure I ought to do anything about it.”

“Not do anything about it? What do you mean?”

“I mean,” he said, “maybe it’s meant to be.”

I snorted in derision. “Come on, you surely don’t believe in nonsense like that.”

He opened the door to enter the building. “Things sometimes aren’t as simple as we think they are.”

Again, some days passed then without my seeing him. Not certain whether he was coming and going or just staying in his rooms, I knocked on his door a time or two, but there was never any response. More and more, I felt uncomfortable about what was going on with him, though I had no clear idea what that might be. If he was in need of medical care, something really should be done, but I was in no position to do much about it; certainly I couldn’t finance his care myself, and I could hardly force him to go to the clinic or see a doctor. So I waited and tried not to worry, but worried anyway.

Around this time a complication arose, in terms of my own physical state; I stumbled when coming up the stairs, and fell and hurt my back. The pain was so intense for a couple of days that I scarcely managed to get out of bed to make my meals. When I did get up and around a little more, I found I could move about only with difficulty, as the pain in my lower back made me want to scream if I turned or twisted too suddenly or too far. Bending over or lifting anything heavy was out of the question. I felt a little silly having admonished Malcolm to see a doctor when I was hesitant to do so myself. There must be some place where I could get inexpensive help with the back pain, but somehow I just didn’t want to bother, figuring that if I waited and took care of myself, my back would get better.

The whole thing slowed me down quite a bit and had me fussing over myself more than I was accustomed to do, and the result was that for some time I neglected to check up on Malcolm. I came to feel somewhat guilty about that; after all, I was probably twenty years his junior, and a younger man ought to be better able to handle adversity. I consoled myself with the

excuse that back pain is hard to abide at any age. Nevertheless, I resolved to look in on my troubled neighbor.

Even as this thought played through my mind one afternoon, I heard his door open and close out in the hall. I wanted to intercept him, but having to move at a hobble I found that by the time I reached my door and opened it and went out, he had already gone down the stairs.

I went down too, with some difficulty of course, and found him once more sitting on the steps outside. I greeted him and sat down beside him—and was shocked anew to see his face.

Perhaps this amount of facial swelling might not be altogether out of proportion with a gum infection or whatever this was, but I was alarmed by what I saw. The golf-ball-sized lump in Malcolm's jaw had grown to the point where he appeared to have some mass the size of an orange in his mouth. The whole left side of his face was beginning to look distorted, and when he spoke his voice was badly blurred now by the swelling.

"I know what you're thinking, Tom," he said.

I put my hands up in bewilderment. "I don't know *what* the hell to think. You said you had a piece of meat or something stuck in a tooth cavity. Obviously it must have caused an infection in your gum. But this is awful. How can I make you understand that you've got to see somebody? I mean it."

He shook his head vehemently. "You don't understand. Do you remember what I read to you out of *The Book of Ng'lwana*, about the Old Gods planting a seed?"

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. "Do you really mean to tell me you think all that silly business about the Old Gods has something to do with—"

He put a gruff hand on my forearm. "There's something I didn't tell you. I—I've prayed to the Old Gods. Not fully knowing what I was asking for, I prayed to be chosen. And now it's almost Walpurgis Time."

I got up and paced back and forth a few times and turned to look at the stricken face of the man sitting up the steps. "You can't be serious. You're not dumb enough to think that if you pray to a lot of—"

“But I did it, Tom. I did. Maybe I shouldn’t have.”

“Aw, for Christ’s sakes, man! This isn’t the Middle Ages. Look, you have a severely infected mouth, a foreign substance lodged under your gums that’s badly swelling your jaw. It doesn’t have a damned thing to do with any—Listen, I may wreck my back doing it, but I’m taking you to that dental clinic if I have to carry you over there.”

Malcolm stood up and looked resolute. “There’s something *growing* in there.”

“Yeah, I know,” I said. “About a million bacteria.”

“No, it’s something else. I know you mean well, but I want you to leave me to handle all this in my own way.” He moved back up the stairs to go inside. I knew, of course, that in my condition there was nothing I could really do to stop him. I let him go, quietly promising myself to speak to him again and try to help him when I felt better.

But that was going to take some time. When I was a kid my aunt had had a back injury like mine, and as the family was too poor to get professional treatment for her, the injury had taken the better part of a year to heal. I was going to have to take care of myself and hope for the best.

To that end, I was resting in my bed a few days later, in early evening of the last day in April, as a grumbling thunderstorm approached, when I heard a sound from across the hall. From Malcolm’s apartment.

Muffled by passage through the walls, or perhaps muffled in its original state, the sound was hard to make out, except that it seemed to be produced vocally, but more like a sort of groan from the throat than any form of intelligible speech. Still, in some vague way it sounded to me like a cry for help.

Ever since my fall on the stairs I had found it very painful to get off the bed, but I forced myself up and limped through the front room to the door. Out in the hallway, I banged on Malcolm’s door and called his name. From behind the door I could hear sounds that I couldn’t quite make sense of, and more moaning, like someone in distress. Clearly the man was in serious trouble in there.

I tried to listen with the growing rumble of thunder that was gathering outside. As the voice—if that's what one could call it—seemed not to be drawing any closer to the door, I decided he wasn't going to open up, and I slammed my shoulder several times against the door, sending such lightning-bolts of pain up my back that I thought I wasn't going to be able to stand it. But the door did finally give way as I was pushing against it again, and the momentum carried me suddenly into the room.

It was the beginning of something that would change my outlook on life forever.

Malcolm's front room was dark, and I switched on a light. Oddly, the first thing I noticed was the old book open pages-down on the floor. Malcolm himself was slouched in a tattered chair across the room, staring at me with what appeared to be little or no comprehension of his surroundings, one eye squeezed shut and one staring, in a muddled daze, out of a face disarranged almost beyond belief. It was difficult to hear, with the thunder and with a sizzle of rain beginning to beat against the windows of the bedroom beyond, but I thought there was a frightful gurgling sound issuing from his throat; whether it was attempted speech is something I don't know to this day, and never will. The swelling on the left side of his face had grown so large—at least as big as the rest of the head itself—that it had not only pressed his left eye closed, but had ripped that side of his mouth open, spilling a cascade of blood and pus down his neck and chest. This sight was so unnerving that for a moment I didn't notice the foul, purulent odor permeating the room, and when it all did hit me I vomited copiously on the ragged carpet in front of Malcolm's chair. Barely aware that I had done this, I backed out of the room, out into the hallway, and started an agonized descent of the stairwell. There were no phones up here that I knew of, and I had to go get the landlady, Mrs. Miller. Someone had to call for help.

The slowness with which I had to get down the stairs was maddening. I kept thinking how desperately that man up there needed medical attention, and how quickly his condition was getting worse with each passing minute. When I finally made it down to the ground floor, badly out

of breath, and banged on Mrs. Miller's door and saw her slatternly form appear in the doorway, I found it difficult to know how to communicate to her what I had seen upstairs. After some fumbling around, I stammered, "He's horribly ill. You've got to call an ambulance."

She was eyeing me with disgust. "Look at you. Couldn't you even clean yourself up? You've got throw-up all down the front of your shirt. People who can't hold their liquor shouldn't drink."

I slapped my forehead with the flat of my hand. "Didn't you hear what I said? There's a man dying upstairs."

She pushed past me and started puffing her way up the stairwell. "I'll see for myself. Probably nothing to get so excited about. You people drive me crazy sometimes with your foolish notions."

I did my best to follow her up the stairs, but it was slow going; I had discovered on the way down that I apparently hurt my back even worse by breaking in Malcolm's door.

When I reached the third-floor landing and proceeded to limp down the hall to Malcolm's apartment, the door was still wide open, and Mrs. Miller was standing just inside, evidently transfixed by what she saw there. I could understand that.

But it was worse now, much worse, as I could see all too clearly when I looked past the landlady into the gloom of the apartment, trying to get my mind to take in what sat in the chair across the room.

Any remaining resemblance to the contours of a human head were gone now. What *had* been a head had now swelled into a puffy-looking mass, three or four feet across, surmounting the twitching body like some grotesque balloon parodying facial features that now were spread irregularly upon the liquescent surface and growing further apart even as I watched—an eye here, an ear there, elsewhere thinly scattered tufts of hair—as the swelling continued to expand. Mrs. Miller was unmoving, frozen in her tracks, and I sensed how wide-eyed a look of stark terror must have resided in her face, even though I couldn't see it from the doorway. At some point I noticed that the puffball, growing ever larger (five feet across now, and devoid of any recognizable human features), was making a dry, sibilant kind

of sound—*pffffhhhhh!*—that I would never want to hear twice in one lifetime.

But suddenly the spongy mass that had been Malcolm's head either exploded or simply bulged across the intervening space to fasten upon the landlady, who didn't even have time to scream before it engulfed her. She remained on her feet, only because she was embedded in the thing, immovable. By now the foul mass that had issued forth was oozing around her and nearing the doorway where I stood.

I suppose I must somehow have made my way back down the hall to the stairwell, down the stairs, out onto the street, but I don't remember any of it, even the pain I would have had to overcome, getting out of the building. My next clear memory is that of wandering the city streets in the rain, many blocks from that accursed apartment building, mumbling in a kind of hysterical singsong to myself. Eventually I went to the police.

When they investigated the building at my behest they found, up on the third floor, only a powdery residue all over Malcolm's front room and the floor of the hallway outside his door. Whether this was all that remained of the thing or was a trace left behind when, still intact, it departed, I scarcely dared to wonder. There may still be something out there, puddled up in alleyways, waiting to feed on the unwary. The police apparently aren't actively looking for anything like what I described to them, because they didn't believe me, though they have no explanation for the fact that all they found of Malcolm Boyle and Mrs. Miller was a few assorted bones and other body parts, partly decomposed in some odd way.

And I—well, my world will never be the same. Naturally I have never gone back to that apartment building, or anywhere near it, but staying away does not remove from my consciousness the fact that everything has changed for me. My dreams are haunted by that shabby man sitting on a rise of crumbling concrete steps, an ancient book open upon his knees, a man who spoke to me of Old Gods who would leave a seed that would grow into something to *lurk among men*.

If something, some force, can reach its tentacles of influence down through unimagined spans of space and time to seize upon a poor soul and

leave a seed and make a vessel of a human form, a vessel for some presence so unthinkable that the mind recoils from it—if we are that open to the whims of chaos and madness—then I cannot think, ever again, that in such a universe there is any comfort, any sanity, or any special place for the hapless creatures that are humankind.

Fire Breeders

SUNNI K BROCK

Sunni K Brock writes speculative fiction, poetry, and nonfiction, and edits digital video. She has been published in several anthologies and periodicals, and has edited three films, including the Rondo Award–winning documentary The Ackermmonster Chronicles! Her strong technical background includes working for Microsoft, Adobe, and Sonic Solutions, with expertise in multimedia, intelligent learning algorithms, and exploration of virtual reality and lucid dreaming. She enjoys spending her days working alongside her husband, author/filmmaker Jason V Brock, tending to their pet herptiles, running their technology consulting business, cooking extravagant vegetarian meals, and aggravating friends on Facebook.

“O,” A YOUNG WOMAN MUTTERED TO HERSELF, panting as she stopped at the floor break in the stairs. “I won’t let them use me.”

She looked up the steps, determination setting in on her delicate blue pale features. Her legs wobbled as she gripped the railing with a scaly hand. Wiping her brow, a large swath of once thick golden hair came away on her sleeve, revealing an opalescent scalp. *Not much time.*

Climbing slowly, feet aching, breath labored, she focused on ending the cycle once and for all. *Not me. Not this time.* Her gut tightened in an internal spasm. She was carrying... *them.*

Must do it now while they’re still tiny. If I’m going to die, I’m taking them with me.

Finally at the top of the stairs, she struggled with the heavy access door until one last push spread the rooftop light over the dimly lit stairwell. Rusty chains kept her from opening it all the way, but she was able to squeeze through the gap and out into the sea salt air.

Yes, she could see it now: Containment. Cold.

By the time they found her, it would be too late.

* * *

“This is the worst hotel ever!” Leah threw the remote onto the bed. “TV doesn’t even work.”

“We only have to suffer through it tonight, I promise.” Josh paused from brushing his teeth. “After my meetings tomorrow, we’ll find another place to stay.”

“Where? There wasn’t much of anything on the way here—this town is so *remote*, we can’t even get cell phone service. I don’t know *why* they would pick this place for a climate change documentary. Not exactly the picture of a high-tech green future...”

“Not sure, but I think the producer is from here, some sort of marine biologist. Anyway, whining about it isn’t going to help. We’re stuck at the old Gilman House, at least for now.” Josh gave Leah his best reassuring smile. He handed her a bottle of water he had refilled from the sink.

She took a sip, set the bottle on the nightstand, then sighed and collapsed onto the bed. “You know I hate tap water—the minerals make me itchy. Besides, it smells fishy like everything else in this place.”

“It’s the only choice we have, baby. I know you get thirsty when you’re nervous. You’ll be all right.” Josh pulled the curtain back a little and peered out into the darkness. “Hey, we *are* right on the bay.”

“You’re right. Maybe it’ll be a nice view in the morning.” Leah calmed a bit, resigned to make the most of it.

“Yes. Good attitude, honey. Let’s get some rest—our breakfast meet-and-greet is early.” He returned to the bathroom to rinse his toothbrush. From the faucet he filled a glass, took a swig of water, and then spit into the sink before drinking the rest.

“I know you’re right. Besides, if all goes well, you’ll be on television!” She stretched out, trying to make herself comfortable.

“Could mean new opportunities for us. I want to see what they’re thinking. What’s the angle on interviewing *me*—what does a physicist have to do with their ‘vision’?” He returned to the bedside.

“I told you, I think they want you to speculate on new energy sources.”

“The producer, Mr. Fisher or something, will only say that he wants my expert ‘reaction’ to a theory. Won’t say much more, except that they need a breakthrough from traditional heating sources. Anyway, he’s got the ear of the network and this could be a good opportunity.” Josh put his hand on her knee.

“Ooh, I can see it now. ‘Dr. Joshua Harding, Professor of Advanced Physics and Savior of Planet Earth.’” She made a square with her fingers as

if to frame Josh in the shot.

“Hmmm... But the History Channel? I hope it’s not some alien bullshit—or mermaids.”

Leah giggled and threw a pillow at Josh. “Maybe I can be a mermaid!” She flopped around like a fish on the creaky bed.

Josh laughed and jumped on top of her. They rolled around until Leah finally ended up on top. “Now, kiss me so I can be your princess.”

“You already *are* my princess,” he said intensely before their lips met.

* * *

Bright blue and yellow light rippled above the water’s surface. Waves gently rocked the undersea plants as Leah tried to focus on the darkness in front of her. I must be drowning. The thought floated there for a moment before she felt something slide around her leg—not unpleasant, but soothing, anchoring her weightless body in a gentle grip.

“You are not dead, Leah.” A woman’s voice spoke from close behind, reassuring, whispery with low crystalline harmonics. “You are safe with me.”

The words made Leah feel drowsy, languid. Long strands of golden wavy hair surrounded her, carried by an invisible current. She felt a hand on her stomach.

“Leah...” it whispered.

Who—who are you?” Leah asked, unsure if the sound had escaped her mouth. Strange, she thought, there aren’t any bubbles.

“Take my breath, Leah. We shall complete the circle.” A face, beautiful and delicate as porcelain, appeared before her, piercing her with blue-green eyes, its perfect white lips coming closer to hers.

Leah blinked as the next wave swayed her body away and then toward the angelic creature. She parted her mouth to accept the gift.

A rush of bubbles, sea water, and particles of glistening matter filled her. She inhaled as deeply as she could, feeding on the vitality.

Now, cradling Leah’s face with a glittering hand, the entity kept their mouths together. Leah felt the thing around her leg sliding up between her thighs and

another one joining from behind. Breasts heaving, nipples tingling, she moaned as she submitted herself fully.

As the ocean overcame her, all her weightless being was filled by its life; she reached a soft climax—

Leah glanced at the clock on the bedside table. *Got to get back to sleep.*

She rolled over to snuggle with Josh. Flickering light swept into the room through tattered curtains.

Sighing, Leah quietly got out of bed to see if she could pull them tighter. As she approached, a figure emerged from the shadows.

“Jesus!” Leah jumped back, covering her naked body.

A girl, perhaps a teen or college kid dressed in long, hanging sleeves, stood silently in front of her like some apparition. She reached out, arms extended, toward Leah.

“Josh, wake up! There’s someone in here!” Leah moved clumsily back to the bed.

“Christ, Leah, what the—” Josh sat up.

The girl, now standing at the edge of the bed, spoke flatly. “I need firewood.”

“Great! *We* don’t need *this*.” Josh switched on the light. “Leah, throw me my robe and deal with her so I can get dressed.”

* * *

“If you won’t tell me your name, is there somewhere we can take you? Someone we can call?” Leah was exasperated by the quiet girl.

The young woman, clad in draping, filthy garb, a wreath of dried flowers pinned to her dirty hair, stared blankly, seated rigidly in the only chair by a battered desk in the corner. Leah regarded her suspiciously, wondering if the attire was the result of hippie fashion, poverty, or homelessness—or all three. The girl repeated: “I need wood.”

“You keep saying that.” Leah tightened the belt on her robe and looked pleadingly at Josh, who was now emerging from the bathroom.

“She’s high or something. We should call the cops... or the front desk. Let them deal with her.” Josh was irritated, grumpy from lack of sleep.

Pounding erupted at the door.

Leah, anxious: “Maybe someone’s looking for her.”

Josh rushed past them to the door, reflexively looking through the peephole, but it had been filled with putty. “Who’s there?” he shouted.

More pounding.

“Who is it? What do you want?”

The beating increased and the door groaned against its frame. A few large thuds, and the hinges began to loosen, cracks forming in the wood around them.

“Shit!” Josh grabbed the lamp from the desk for defense as Leah ducked over the girl, who remained unfazed.

The door slowly crept open, doorknob hanging at an angle. Josh swung the lamp back over his head, ready to strike.

Two people, as eccentrically attired as the girl, took a step forward, then grabbed the door, yanking it from its frame. They dragged it away.

Astonished, Josh let the lamp fall to his side but was bumped by the girl, who had shrugged past Leah and was now pushing the desk toward the doorway.

“Stop!” Leah grabbed the girl’s shoulder. “*What is this about?*”

“We need *wood*—for the fire.” The girl blinked and then resumed trying to move the desk.

Leah reached for the phone, still on the desk. She managed to get the receiver to her ear, but there was no dial tone. “*Fuck.*” She dropped the handset and shoved the girl aside.

Josh was ready to hit the girl with the lamp, but was pushed aside by another intruder. More followed until the room was filled with the invasive strangers, all of them intent on stripping every bit of wood from the place—furnishings, trim, paneling.

In shock, Leah and Josh ran into the hall and watched as dozens of the peculiar characters removed the contents from all the other rooms and hauled them outside. They were again displaced as yet more of the

unyielding crazies overwhelmed the entire hotel, removing sideboards, railings, and flooring like a swarm of ragged termites.

Leah and Josh made their way around the commotion and down to the first floor lobby. It was stripped bare—only cables and nails hanging out from walls and ceiling, rugs crumpled under debris. What had been the front desk was now an empty space; not a keeper or bellhop anywhere to be seen.

After checking the other rooms for any sane person but unable to find help, they finally exited to the street. The disheveled horde that had ravaged the hotel was now taking its wooden spoils to the bay. As they watched in awe, the glow on the horizon brightened.

Not knowing what else to do, Josh and Leah followed the light, careful to keep a safe distance. “What are they *doing*?” Leah stayed as close to Josh as she could, shivering in the night breeze.

Josh gazed at the bonfire. “Looks like they’re partying.”

“This is crazy.” Leah stomped her feet. At least they had the sense to go back, put their shoes on, and grab their jackets and the water bottle before trekking around. Fortunately, the looters weren’t interested in burning their clothes.

Josh started toward the revelry. “Let’s get closer and see what’s happening.”

Leah reluctantly followed.

* * *

“It is much warmer down here.” Leah watched the high flames lick the night sky. The partiers seemed unaware of their presence as they chanted and danced around the huge bonfire ring on the shore.

“I guess we should find something to sit on. We can’t stand here all night.” Josh kicked at the sand.

“So that’s your plan? Just sit here until morning?” Leah knew they didn’t really have much choice, but she was whining anyway.

“Yep.” Josh put his arm around her. “I’m not going back to that hotel. You can if you want.”

Leah knew he had no intention of letting her go off alone. “No, I’d rather stay here with you. Can we at least get a little closer so we can stay warm?”

“Yeah, okay. I think I see a blanket or something just over there.” Josh led her forward.

Leah sat in front of Josh on the ground for a long while. It was surprisingly cozy. As they occasionally passed the water bottle back and forth to sip, the heat comforted them; the flickering light soothed her nerves. Josh held her tightly, keeping vigil in case the kids started acting aggressive. So far they seemed pretty uninterested in anything but dancing.

“Where’s the music?” Leah asked sleepily. “They’re just jumping around to their own voices.”

“Must be in their heads. Or maybe we can’t hear it this far away.”

“Are you kidding? I can hear the wood crackling.” Leah leaned back into Josh a little more.

“What I can’t figure out is what they’re on. We haven’t seen them drink, smoke, eat, nothing.” Josh sound puzzled.

“I don’t know.” She felt drowsy, relaxed. The fire seemed all-consuming now, filling the sky.

Josh fell quiet, mesmerized by the flames and the orange silhouettes of writhing bodies.

As they both continued to watch, the rhythms of the dance, the chanting and the cracking of the bonfire began to merge, weaving a tapestry of sound and movement. The smoky, salt-tinged air pillowed around them, lulling them into serenity.

“What are they singing?” she asked.

“Don’t know,” he replied, his voice low and husky. “Sounds like gibberish.”

One after another, the dancers leapt higher and higher; the roaring fire hummed, and the burning wood began to sound more like drums than random pops. The ocean now joined the percussion, and the intensity

increased as each crashing wave grew louder and more in tune with the dance, creating the ambiance of some ancient ritual reaching a crescendo.

Through blurry eyes, Leah witnessed the circling crowd, now fully entranced with swaying movement, starting to change. Individuals joined to become other things: tall, lanky, with shiny blue-green skin that reflected the firelight. They reached up to the top of the flames with long scaly arms, webbed fingers splayed in reverence. Leah gasped when one of the giant things turned its amphibious head to them, revealing large black-orbed eyes and a thick-lipped frown, dripping with stringy mucus.

She tried to speak, to see if Josh had seen it, but was unable to move at all. Forced to watch, she thought she saw the dancers grow even taller, thinner—then they slowly marched to the water and disappeared into the briny deep. In spite of the bizarre display, she could barely keep her eyes open. The fire began to recede from her awareness.

Josh had since slumped over; Leah joined him, closing her eyes at last, awash in a sea of weightless slumber.

* * *

“Sir, *sir*... Are you Joshua Harding?” Two men stood in the rising sunlight.

Josh and Leah awoke. Josh looked up at the men. “Yes, I’m sorry?” He pushed himself up to sit. His head was pounding and he felt stiff, cold.

Leah looked at the charred, smoldering remains of the fire, trying to recall the events of the night before. She moved onto her knees.

“Dr. Harding, Mrs. Harding, I’m Jack Fisher. We were supposed to meet.” The man extended a hand to help Leah up. Josh stood and assisted his wife.

The other man motioned back toward the hotel, addressing Fisher. “Should I get the crew out here?”

“No, no. Let’s worry about our guests first.” Fisher turned back to the couple, concerned. “I feel responsible for your inconvenience. Let’s go back.”

* * *

“Wrap!” The puckish, gray-bearded man in a baseball cap called out to the film crew.

“Thank you for agreeing to go on camera, Dr. Harding.” Fisher sat in a director’s chair off-camera while people busily disassembled equipment around him. The makeshift set near the peer was noisier than they had hoped, but the hotel was in shambles.

“I’m happy to talk about what I experienced last night, but I’m not sure how it’s relevant to your project.” Josh was sweating a little, tired but relieved that he had gotten through the interview.

“No worries, Doctor. As I said, some of the backward folks out here, they’re so intent on doing things in the *old* ways. Guess you saw that firsthand.” Fisher kicked at a bit of seaweed from the sand under his chair. “Must be something in the water. Well, these things are *cycles*—”

“Yeah, but tear up a hotel, just for a beach fire?” Josh asked, incredulous.

“They must’ve gotten carried away with the party. Pretty out of it...” Fisher grinned.

“Yeah, I’ll say. My wife and I as well. I fell asleep on the beach while they were dancing away. And then I thought... I mean, something strange seemed—” Josh broke off. Looking at the director, he noted that Fisher seemed confused, stroking his face and staring intently at him. The back of Fisher’s hand was flaky, as though he suffered from a mild skin condition. Josh swallowed, then forced a smile. “Never mind. Leah, well, she gets nervous easily.” Josh glanced up to the road and then at his watch. He was ready to take her back to civilization as soon as this was over.

“How is she?” Fisher seemed concerned.

“She’s taking a nap in the car, said she didn’t feel well. Hopefully she’s not having any more nightmares about *fish* people.” A sour look flitted across Fisher’s face; Josh was starting to feel a bit nervous himself. “Look, if it’s no offense and we’re done here, I’d like to get up the road. Get her to another hotel. Chill out a bit. I’m not feeling so hot, either.”

“Of course, Doctor. I totally understand. My people will be in touch.” Fisher waved as Josh, already out of his chair, plodded through the sand back toward his rental car.

A walkie-talkie squealed. “Jack, Jack! You gotta get back up here.” The voice coming from Fisher’s pocket sounded very excited.

Fisher took out the radio. “Yeah, what is it, Burt?”

“Jack, it’s a body—in the hotel water tank.”

“Yeah? One of ’em must’ve fallen in last night when they were taking the place apart.”

“Uh, no, I don’t think so, Jack. It’s been here a while. So badly decayed you can hardly tell it’s human.”

“I’ll be right up!”

Jack Fisher motioned his crew to the hotel.

* * *

Josh opened the driver’s side door and got into the car. Bent over the wheel, he was about to turn the key when Leah jumped out of the car and ran toward the ocean.

“Leah, what’s wrong? Are you okay?” Josh got out and chased after her.

As she reached the surf, Leah stopped, grasping her middle. “I—I feel sick...”

Josh started to make a gagging sound. His insides gurgled and twisted in cramping pain.

Both hunched forward. Leah fell to her knees and vomited into the dirt. Josh leaned over and emptied his stomach, milky fluid and dark, shimmering objects hitting the ground, joining hers and splashing his feet.

“Oh my God!” he exclaimed as he watched the wretched contents begin to move. Hundreds of small creatures wriggled free of their slimy casings; the pool of fluid teemed with gelatinous beings, all trying to get away, slithering toward the water’s edge.

He heaved again.

Leah screamed as the surf washed them all out to sea.

Casting Fractals

SAM GAFFORD

Sam Gafford is a fiction writer, literary critic, and publisher. His fiction has appeared in Black Wings and other venues, and his criticism in Lovecraft Studies, Studies in Weird Fiction, Crypt of Cthulhu, TAPS Magazine, and elsewhere. He is the editor of Sargasso, a journal devoted to the study of William Hope Hodgson, and he is co-editor of the critical anthology William Hope Hodgson: Voices from the Borderland (Hippocampus Press, 2015).

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“VER READ MUCH H. P. LOVECRAFT, KID?” ASKED Carl Eckhardt.

We were sitting in Mulligan’s Bar down in the Lower East Side of Manhattan. It was June, 1962, and it had taken me the better part of the year to find Eckhardt. Now I’d begun to wonder why I bothered.

He was well into his third drunken stupor, according to the bartender. These were the years when you could drink all night in New York City as long as you knew where to go and your money held out long enough. Near as I could tell, Eckhardt had run out of both.

“Can’t say as I recall the name,” I answered and took a full swig of my beer. “What is it? Some kind of porn?”

Eckhardt chuckled and scratched his chest harshly.

“Nah. Horror stories. Back when I was a little squirt, I was nuts for the pulps, you know? I read them all. *The Shadow*. *Doc Savage*. *G8 and His Battle Aces*. But some of my favorites were the horror pulps. *Weird Tales*. *Shudder Stories*. I’d buy every one that came out. Drove my father nuts! He really hated those things.

“Anyway, Lovecraft was one of the big writers for *Weird Tales* and one of my favorites. He was”—Eckhardt waved his hand, nearly spilling his whiskey—“ten times better than most of the other hacks. Not that it made much of a difference. Not many people remember him today and even fewer people read him. That’s something we reporters can relate to, eh?”

Eckhardt motioned for another round.

“Carl, so what? What’s this got to do with anything? No one’s seen or heard from you since you got fired from the *Daily Mirror*. Now you’re sitting

here sprouting some garbage about a pulp writer from thirty years ago. What does it matter?”

The bartender served out another glass of whiskey and Eckhardt took a hard swallow. He made the kind of hiss between his teeth that only comes with hard liquor.

“And that, my young friend Richard, is the exact point. Everything is connected. In one of his stories, Lovecraft wrote something that I’ve never forgotten. It’s stayed with me all these years. He said, ‘The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents.’ I memorized it. What do you think that means, Richard?”

I shrugged. I truly didn’t see the point to any of this. “I don’t know. I guess that we forget a lot of stuff?”

“Nah. It means that there are things going on all around us. Stuff we don’t even think is important, but it is. Everything is connected and if—if—we could put it all together, we’d go mad at what we saw.”

“And what would we see, Carl?”

He sat there for a moment, staring at his glass before emptying it then said, “Our insignificance.”

With an agility I didn’t think he was capable of, Eckhardt got off his stool and stumbled toward the door. “Leave me alone, kid. Just go away, will ya?”

* * *

Carl Eckhardt had been one of the leading reporters of the 1950s in New York City. He hit all the big stories and had front-page bylines on the *New York Herald Tribune* back when that was a “newspaperman’s newspaper.” Carl was the kind of reporter you’d expect to see in movies like *The Front Page*, shirt sleeves rolled up, cigarette clenched in his teeth, and pounding out a breaking story on an old typewriter. He was exactly the kind of reporter I wanted to be.

When I started as a stringer back in 1959, I was in awe of the man. He walked through the newsroom like a giant. People got out of his way and

the only one who ever challenged him was his editor, Lou Kluger. Their screaming matches were legendary. Eckhardt fought for his stories hard, maybe too hard.

Then something happened to him in 1961. It wasn't as if the fight had gone out of him, but now a despondency seeped into his work. And he began to drink. Eckhardt had never been married and had no kids or family. That meant that there was nothing there to keep him from falling off the rails—which he did... spectacularly so.

I happened to be in the newsroom that day. One of the other reporters was working on an article about Sputnik, and I'd brought him some of the details from the paper's morgue. It wasn't a particularly interesting article and I could have written it myself, but there was a hierarchy to be maintained.

Eckhardt was in Kluger's office but, for once, he was on the receiving end of the yelling. I couldn't hear much, but Kluger was howling mad. Something about an article that Eckhardt had written about some dead Russian kids. The issue was that Eckhardt had made some implications regarding their deaths that Kluger, or someone else, highly objected to.

Soon, almost everyone in the newsroom stopped and watched. We knew there was something epic happening even if we didn't know exactly what it was. Words like "jackass" and "joke" could be heard, as well as "drunk" and "washed up." One thing that everyone heard loud and clear was "you're *fired!*"

Eckhardt didn't even bother to clear out his desk. He just walked out of the newsroom as if this was just some play he had already seen and whose outcome he knew. He never came back to the *Herald Tribune* again.

After about a month, they were going to throw out all the stuff from Eckhardt's desk, but I put it all in a box and kept it in my apartment. I didn't know why at the time. It just seemed like the right thing to do.

For the next year, I heard rumors about Eckhardt. He stumbled from paper to paper, writing ever stranger articles. Soon, those who knew him referred to him as the 'monster of the week' reporter. Then came word that he got fired from the *Daily Mirror*. And when the *Daily Mirror* fired you, you

didn't have much lower to go. He had become the reporter's cautionary tale—the kind that we tell to each other in that sort of 'there but for the grace of God' type of thing. Some thought that he had broken under the stress of his work, that the big stories had simply beaten him; others thought he just decided to crawl inside a bottle. But the result was still the same.

I looked for him, but there were only rumors and gossip everywhere I went. When I got my first article published in the *Herald Tribune* (a minor piece about a murder victim), I tried to find him to show him what he had inspired me to do. But, wherever he was, he didn't want to be found.

After that brief meeting in the bar in 1962, I didn't look for him anymore. I didn't get what I wanted from him and probably never would. Besides, after the events in Texas in 1963, we all had more important things to worry about. Eckhardt slipped from my mind and from the pages of the newspapers as if he had never existed. But that was the nature of newspaper work. The only thing that mattered was today's edition. Yesterday's papers, and the men who wrote them, were forgotten.

After the New York newspaper strike of '62-'63, we all went back to work and I finally found myself writing regular articles for the *Herald Tribune*. I was one of the youngest reporters: in a rare sense of foresight, Kluger wanted someone to try and speak to the new generation. Things were happening in the country and the world, and it was an exciting time to be a reporter.

Until I got the message from Eckhardt that day at the end of July, 1965.

It had been left for me at the front desk, and the secretary gave it to me as I was returning from lunch. I'd asked who had left the note and she just replied, "Some bum." She hadn't been at the paper when Eckhardt was there, so she didn't recognize him; but the note was in his characteristic scrawl. It said to meet him at a certain apartment at 5 P.M. and to "bring booze." The signature was Eckhardt's usual unrecognizable jumble, but I knew it well.

I debated if I should just ignore it. Eckhardt belonged to my past and I didn't feel I owed him anything anymore. Whatever his problem, he'd created it himself. But, like a good reporter, I smelled a story; so, at 5 P.M., I

found myself climbing the stairs of a tenement in the Red Hook section of Brooklyn with a bag containing a bottle of Jack Daniel's.

The building was old, probably one of the oldest in the neighborhood. This had been a slum in the '20s and '30s, and not much had changed since then. The hallways smelled of piss and vomit and there were sounds of foreign words and music spilling through the thin walls. I knocked at the appropriate door and waited. There was movement from the other side of the door as if it was taking someone a great deal of effort to get to the door. Eventually, the door opened a creak and a single eye looked at me.

"Did you bring the booze?" Eckhardt asked.

I showed him the bag, and the eye relaxed and smiled at me. The door opened slowly. At first I thought it was because it wasn't used to being opened but, when it did, I saw that it was because there was so much garbage behind it.

Some people would have called Eckhardt a packrat. In 1965, he was just a nut.

"I wasn't sure you'd come," Eckhardt said as he eagerly took the bag from me and started walking down a thin path carved through the debris in his hallway. "But I shouldn't have worried. You've got the gift, sonny Jim! Always knew you did."

"What gift is that?" I asked as I carefully navigated piles of newspapers and books and magazines that looked capable of falling on me any minute and crushing me to death.

"The worst gift of all—*curiosity!*"

I followed him down the hall, looking in the rooms we passed on the way. They were similarly filled with newspapers and books. I noticed that not a few of the volumes had library markings on them and wondered if they'd been stolen. Eckhardt kept scratching at his chest, but I don't think he realized he was doing it. For some reason, it had become some sort of reflex action.

We squeezed around a corner and into a larger room. The tumult was only slightly lessened here. There was an easy chair near the wall by windows that had been blocked with yet more overstuffed bookcases. The

chair faced a furniture contraption upon which perched three televisions. All three of them were on different channels.

There was another, wooden chair that was covered in a pile of papers. I went to move them off and make room for myself when Eckhardt shouted, "No! Don't do that. Everything is carefully ordered and arranged."

He quickly picked up the pile of papers and placed it on top of yet another pile that seemed to have no connection to the original one. If there was any sort of order to the place, it was only in Eckhardt's mind. He scratched his chest again. Bedbugs maybe?

"What do you mean 'ordered,' Carl? This place is a dung-heap. I'm surprised you don't have rats or roaches."

He was insulted by this. "This place is clean, Richard! I'll have no filth here. Look around! Do you see decaying plates of food or garbage?"

It was true. Aside from the papers, books, and magazines, there was no evidence of food. I did notice several empty whiskey bottles, which were neatly placed in the corner.

Eckhardt settled into his seat and opened the bag. He took a glass from the floor near his chair and offered it to me. I nodded a polite refusal, and he scoffed.

"Still no taste for the hard stuff, eh? You'll never be a true newspaperman if you don't learn how to drink like us."

Even if I had learned how to drink, I wasn't fond of the idea of using Eckhardt's glass.

"Why are you watching three TVs at the same time?" I asked.

"Got to keep current. You never know when something important will come on."

One of the televisions was showing a Huckleberry Hound cartoon.

I sighed. "OK, Carl, what am I doing here? What do you want?"

He looked hurt. "Ooo, such hostility from a man who used to guzzle my beer!"

"Fine," I said and looked at my wristwatch, "you've got ten minutes."

He shook his head. "Ten minutes, he gives me. How can I explain the universe in ten minutes?"

I sat down on the wooden chair and finally got a chance to look at some of the books and papers that littered the room. Most were history textbooks, while some were science and mythology and still others were newspapers from places around the world. It was as if all the information in the world had come to this place to die.

“You ever hear of a guy named Charles Fort?” he asked abruptly.

I nodded. “Sure. He was a quack. A poor man’s ‘Ripley’s Believe It or Not.’”

Eckhardt got excited and leaned closer. “No, that’s where you’re wrong. Fort was an archivist of the weird. He charted those strange things that no one could explain and spent his life looking for a connection, a pattern that he never found.”

“And you did?”

He shook his head. “Not all of it. Just a part, a tiny piece.”

Eckhardt leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. He looked tired and old.

“It started,” he said, scratching his chest, “back in 1958 with Van Allen. You may remember that he was the guy who discovered that the Earth was surrounded by radiation belts. This was big news back then and impacted a lot of the space plans. I interviewed Van Allen in ’58, but I wasn’t a big ‘science’ guy. To be honest, it was the kind of story that made all the scientists excited but didn’t really have an impact on the ‘man in the street.’ It wasn’t until I interviewed Van Allen again in ’59 that I learned about what really happened.

“You see, the military brains behind our government decided that they wanted to explode an atomic bomb in outer space.”

I nodded. “Yeah, I remember that. It set off one of those ‘electromagnetic pulses,’ didn’t it?”

“It did; but it was the other bomb, the one they didn’t tell anyone about, that did more.”

“What are you talking about? There was no other bomb.”

Eckhardt smiled. “You still believe in the government, don’t you? Do you know that when the bombs were exploded, Van Allen thought that it

would start an atomic 'chain reaction' that would wipe out all life on this planet? He warned them not to do it and they did it anyway! The 'electromagnetic pulse' bomb was the cover for the other bomb that was ten times more powerful. Van Allen told me he aged a lifetime that day.

"But the 'chain reaction' Van Allen feared never happened, so everyone relaxed and continued with their space radiation research and set off a few more bombs in outer space to make the Russians nervous. Except that something *did* happen, something unexpected."

Eckhardt opened his eyes and looked at me intently.

"Haven't you ever wondered, Richard, why everything is going to hell? Since 1958, the world keeps getting worse and worse. I could give you a list of all the crap that's happened in the last seven years, and it's going to get worse."

I just shook my head.

"The world's going through changes, Carl. You can't have change without pain."

"PAIN? You call this pain?" He threw a pile of papers at me. There were pictures and statements in folders. I could see photos of JFK's assassination mixed with pictures of bodies frozen in snow and Asian villages being torched while flaming children ran down the streets. "The world's going mad, Richard."

"Carl, this doesn't prove anything. You know that there have been disasters like this throughout history. Are you going to blame Lincoln's assassination on this now?"

"No! You're not getting it! You remember what I told you once? 'Everything is connected!' It didn't start in 1958, it just got worse. Because of the bombs."

I started to get out of my chair. "You know, you're starting to sound like one of those conspiracy nuts who believe that JFK was killed by the mob. Why did you want me to come here anyway? I haven't seen or heard from you in years, and now you want to meet and you start sprouting all these insane theories. Why am I here?"

Eckhardt took a big swig of whiskey from his glass and glared at me.

“OK, here it is.” He wiped his mouth with his hand. “When they kicked me out of the *Herald Tribune*, I left some stuff there in my desk. I need it back now. Do you have any idea what happened to it? Did they throw it out?” His voice was that of a pleading man—a drunk begging for one more drink.

Until that moment, I had completely forgotten about the box buried in my closet. I looked at him and wondered if I should tell him the truth and eventually decided to because, if for no other reason, it would get me out of there faster. “I have it. I put all the stuff from your desk in a box and kept it.”

His face lightened up. It was like seeing a kid when he wakes up and realizes it is Christmas morning.

“You have it? *Thank God!* You’ve got to bring me the box. Right away. *Tonight!*”

I shook my head. “No, I’m not doing that, Carl. I’ll bring it over in a couple of days when I have a chance, or I’ll send it over by some courier. You’ve waited for it for a few years, you can wait a few more days.”

He wanted to hit me then. I could see it in his eyes, but then they relaxed, except that the hate was replaced with a steely glare. “Sure, no problem, Richard. You send it over when you get a chance. Why don’t you sit down and have a drink with me? Talk about old times.”

“No thanks,” I said as I started walking down the path back to the front door. “I’ll get that stuff to you but, Carl, don’t call me again. You understand?”

“Sure, sure, I understand. But listen, Richard, don’t take too long, OK? I’m running out of time. ‘The center cannot hold!’”

I was out the door and away before he could say any more. Carl Eckhardt had become a fungus and I was intent upon scraping him off my shoe as quickly as possible.

* * *

I forgot about Eckhardt almost immediately.

There were other things that were going on in the world and I truly didn't care that much about a washed-up reporter who was festering in an apartment full of junk. The world was moving forward in ways that no one could have predicted before. Martin Luther King Jr. had led his successful four-day march to Montgomery, Alabama, with 25,000 civil rights activists earlier in the year. President Johnson had announced his plan for a 'Perfect Society' and we all felt that we were building a better world.

Except then things started to fall apart.

Malcolm X, a radical civil rights activist, had been assassinated that February. Johnson escalated the 'police action' in Vietnam by bringing the number of troops overseas to 125,000 in July, which was the same month he announced his "War on Poverty" by creating Medicare and Medicaid. More than one of us in the newsroom wondered about Johnson's schizophrenic nature. And then, three days after I had left Eckhardt's apartment in a huff, the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles exploded in a race riot.

It began as a typical traffic stop with the white California Highway Patrol officer stopping a black driver he believed to be intoxicated. It escalated quickly from there and would last for four days. What made it so horrifying and frightening to everyone was that it was televised. The violence was right there in your living room. There were frequent bulletins on the TV and updates coming over the wires. Most of us slept in the newsroom for those four days, deathly afraid that we would miss the latest news. Through it all, Walter Cronkite was there on CBS News.

When it was all over, there were 34 deaths, 1,032 injuries, 3,438 arrests, and over \$40 million in property damage. It was the worst riot in American history and, even more than the sight of 25,000 people marching for equal rights, it seared the racial experience into our minds.

It had been the kind of four days that you couldn't forget if you tried. I had put the last words down on an article about local reaction to the riots and had given it to the stringer when my phone rang. It was the Police Department and they wanted to verify my name and address. I was then

told that I needed to get to my apartment quickly. The implication was that if I did not show up, they would come and get me.

The cab got me home fast but couldn't get me through the police barricade. I gave my name to the first cop I saw, and he rushed me through into the building. I didn't live in a really expensive neighborhood, but it wasn't a slum either. As I walked inside, the janitor gave me an evil look. It was likely that I'd have to be looking for a new home after this.

My place was on the third floor, and I passed several cops going up and down the stairs. A couple of medical-looking people were talking among themselves outside my door and just shaking their heads. I caught the words "from the inside" before I was hustled away from them. No matter how much I asked, no one would tell me why I was there, but that became obvious once I walked through my front door.

The place had been ransacked. All my books and records and stuff had been tossed across the room. "This is it?" I asked the cop who'd escorted me upstairs. "You called me here because my place got robbed?"

"Nah," said the detective in a cheap but clean suit who walked over to me. "We called you because of him."

He pointed behind my couch, and there was Eckhardt. He was not only dead but quite spectacularly dead. Something had ripped a bloody hole in his chest.

"I'm Detective Cardy. This is your apartment, right?"

I was stunned. Even though I had covered murder trials I had never seen a dead body myself. Especially not one I knew.

"Yeah, yeah, this is my place. What the hell happened here?"

Cardy guided me away from the body, but I couldn't keep from looking at it. "That's what we're hoping you can tell us. Did you know him?"

"What? Yeah, that's—that's Carl Eckhardt. I used to work with him at the paper. He was a reporter."

"Uh-huh. And when's the last time you saw him?"

I stopped to think. "Uh, I guess about a week or so ago. I visited him at his apartment. How did he know where I lived? Who the hell did this to him?"

We walked into my small kitchen and I sat down dumbly on a chair. Part of me was horrified at seeing my friend lying dead in my living room, but the other part of me was taking notes and analyzing everything for the article I was already itching to write.

“That’s a good question. We got a call from your janitor last night saying that there was a lot of noise coming from your place. When the responding officers got here, they found the door open and your friend on the floor. Any idea who might want to do something like this to him?”

I shook my head. “No, none of us had even heard from him in years. He’d dropped off the face of the earth.”

“And yet you saw him a week ago? How was that?”

I explained how Eckhardt had left me a message and I had visited him at his place.

“Why did he want to see you? I mean, you hadn’t heard from this mook in years, right? Then, out of the blue, he says ‘come on over’ and you come running? What’s the deal?”

“I think,” I said hesitantly, “that he just wanted free booze. He started going on about how there was some giant conspiracy and that the world was going to hell.” For some reason, I didn’t mention the box that I hoped was still in my closet.

Cardy snickered at that. “Yeah, ain’t it though? And where were you last night?”

I lit a cigarette and took a deep breath, feeling the nicotine hit my system. “At the paper. I’ve been there for the last four or five days. I never left the newsroom except for coffee or to take a piss. We were covering the Watts race riot. You hear of it?”

Cardy looked disgusted, which told me a lot about the man. “Yeah, seen it on the TV. Guess we get what we deserve, huh? Anyone at the paper can verify this?”

I nodded. “Just about anyone. Go ahead and ask.”

Flipping his notebook closed, Cardy grinned at me. “Oh, we will. Trust me. Thing is, this is a weird one. I mean, there’s very little blood. Wounds like that, we should be swimming in blood, but there’s barely enough to wet

a sponge. Of course, he must have put up quite a fight, right? I mean, this place is a mess. And why would he be here anyway? He wouldn't be looking for anything, would he?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. More booze? Stuff to sell? The guy had fallen pretty far, you know. He was living like a bum."

"Uh-huh. Well, they're clearing out the body now, so we'll be out of your way in a minute. Anything else you can think of that we might need to know?"

"Not that I can think of."

"Right. Well, here's my card. I'll be in touch. And you might want to invest in some new locks."

Cardy left the room and I sat there, listening and waiting. I called the night desk and quickly gave them the details. The editor was suitably unimpressed, which meant that it might get a mention in the obits and maybe in the back section. The cops took lots of pictures, made measurements, and eventually took Eckhardt away while I waited. The last cop left and still I waited until the barricades were removed and the last patrol cars drove away. There was no one left in the street when I finally allowed myself to go to the closet. There, buried beneath a pile of old clothes and bags of stuff my mother had sent me, was Eckhardt's box. I don't know how he could have missed it.

I pulled it out of the closet and brought it to the kitchen table, taking care not to look at where the body had been only an hour or so ago. Opening the box, I saw a few personal items like his nameplate and mug and desk crap. Below them was a pile of papers that I only vaguely remembered taking out of the bottom drawer of Eckhardt's desk. I sat down at the table, poured myself a glass of beer, and started to look through them.

By the time I had finished, it was late morning and I could barely breathe. It was too much for me to deal with and I was close to just burning all the files. But, like Eckhardt, I couldn't bring myself to do it. I needed to learn *more*.

After that, I began keeping records of my own and, once I knew what to look for, it wasn't hard to find. There was Albert DeSalvo, the 'Boston Strangler,' who confessed to the rapes and murder of thirteen women, although others have said he was not in it alone. Kitty Genovese, in 1963, was raped and stabbed to death outside her apartment building in Queens, New York. Reportedly thirty-seven people in neighboring apartments saw or heard the attack and did nothing. In 1965, Hurricane Betsy (a Category 4 storm) struck Florida and the Gulf Coast, resulting in eighty-one deaths and over \$1 billion in damage. In 1965, the Compton Cafeteria Riots in San Francisco began when police were called to arrest transgender customers who were picketing the cafeteria. The plate glass windows of the cafeteria were broken and a police car's windows and doors were smashed. It is impossible to determine the injuries or deaths resulting from the riots because newspapers agreed not to cover it. To them, it never happened. Also in 1966, Charles Joseph Whitman climbed a tower at the University of Texas at Austin where, using a rifle, he shot and killed sixteen people and wounded thirty-two. His motives were unknown, as Whitman was shot and killed by an Austin police officer.

The list goes on and on throughout the '60s. The Six-Day War in the Middle East. The Apollo 1 test launch fire that killed three astronauts trapped in the missile. The Tlatelulco Massacre where as many as 300 students were executed by Mexican military and police ten days before the opening of the 1968 Summer Olympics in Mexico City. A leak of nerve gas in Utah that killed 6,000 sheep. The My Lai Massacre where between 347 to 504 unarmed civilians in South Vietnam were murdered by U.S. troops. Victims included men, women, children, and infants, with some of the women being gang-raped and their bodies mutilated.

Then there were the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy in 1968. The best chances for peace and guidance in the coming decades died with them. The Manson Family murders in 1969, where a pregnant Sharon Tate and others were brutally killed. 1969 also ushered in the presidency of Richard M. Nixon. Every time I saw his face on television, I felt an itching deep within my chest.

I have made my files and my notes. Some days I wonder if Eckhardt would have made the same connections. Once you know, it becomes absurdly easy to spot it. With time, you can even spot the ones that have been influenced the most. My head hurts most of the time now. Drinking helps a bit but doesn't take it all away.

Eckhardt's original files have become the core of my collection of misery. I have them memorized in case some day my apartment is 'robbed' even though, eventually, they will find me with a suspicious hole in my chest. But I remember every word in those files.

There were eight files in the box. Most were on specific cases or events, but the last one was filled with Eckhardt's notes. He had been working on an article that would have tied all these cases, and more, together. My mind flew back to that day all those years ago when Eckhardt had gotten fired. I'm sure now that it was because of this article that he tried to write.

One of the files was labelled "VA belt" and had pictures of scientists posing happily for the camera. Under one of them was the name Van Allen. Another, later picture of him showed a man who looked haunted, as if he jumped at every sound around him. There were government reports with large blocks of text blacked out to the point where they made no sense, but there were also handwritten statements that Eckhardt had gathered from Van Allen and some of the men in the photograph. They were trying to warn about what had really happened when those bombs exploded. The words 'fractured reality' were used more than once.

Another file was even more disturbing. It was labeled "Dyatlov Pass" and had gruesome pictures of frozen bodies. It looked as if it had been the result of a failed rescue attempt, but even more disturbing were autopsy photos of some of the bodies. One had the eyes gouged out and another was posed to show that the victim's tongue was missing. Some of the papers in the file were in Russian, which I couldn't understand. A crude map showed the progress of a party through a mountainous region close to Siberia.

The third file said simply "Space." It was a list of space missions, but I didn't recognize any of them. Most of them were Soviet launches, but there were several American ones listed as well. None of them were on any

official list of space missions. Eckhardt, again, had pictures of the missiles and crew, but these were no public relations events staged for photographers: these were frightened men climbing into rocket cans for secret purposes. Eckhardt had notes next to each that read either “lost,” “abandoned,” or “dead on recovery.” One particularly disturbing photo showed a Soviet woman standing next to a Russian general. Neither one looked eager to discover new horizons. There was a report that had a detailed translation of a transmission from one lone cosmonaut whom I believe to be that woman. She had been pleading for help, pleading with them to send someone to rescue her from something. In the end, she begged them to destroy the capsule, but they refused. They demanded to know what was happening and all she could say was that something was walking on the outside of the capsule, tapping and making *rhyming* sounds. Her last words were screams and the final lines of the translation simply said, “sounds of metal collapsing and being ripped.” Eckhardt’s note next to her mission said only, “sacrificed.”

There were more. Many cases of unbelievable horror and brutality that, on the surface, had no connection whatsoever. But, the more I looked, the more I thought I could see something there behind it all. Just when I thought I had a grip on it, though, it would slip away and leave me with only pieces of the puzzle.

That’s when I read Eckhardt’s notes. Like most reporters, his handwriting was terrible, but I could read most of it. At first, it was like the ravings of some lunatic, but by the time I reached the end I felt entirely differently.

“ITEM: 1958. Despite warnings to the contrary by Van Allen and other scientists, America proceeds with plans to explode an atomic device in the upper atmosphere to counter Russian tests. The resultant blast knocks out electronic devices over $\frac{1}{4}$ of the hemisphere. What only Van Allen knew was that a second bomb was exploded at the same time. The first was a decoy. It was the second that was the real test. After the detonation, the Aurora Borealis reached the brightest intensity ever recorded before or since. Van Allen had been afraid that the bombs would ignite the

atmosphere and set off a deadly ‘cascade effect’ that would destroy all life on this planet. The second bomb opened a crack in space and something came through. Van Allen is haunted by the thought of what that ‘something’ could have been.

“ITEM: 1959. Nine experienced hikers enter the Ural Mountains in Russia. None return. A search party finds their abandoned tent, which looks perfectly normal. There are slits in the back of the tent, which later study shows were cut *from the inside*. When the bodies are found later, they are all barefoot and several are not wearing their coats. Something had compelled them to leave their tent in the middle of the night, unclothed and unprepared, to go into the snow in -22 degree temperatures. None of the corpses showed any signs of struggle but two had fractured skulls, another two had broken ribs, and one was missing parts of her face. Her tongue had been ripped out. Photographic evidence found at the scene (along with personal journals of the hikers) described how the night before they had seen mysterious orbs of light above the mountains. The records of the investigation were quickly sealed and the bodies quietly buried. The official cause of death is listed as a ‘*compelling natural force*.’ What ‘natural force’ found them camped alone in the mountain?

“ITEM: 1960. Largest earthquake ever recorded hits Chile. Measures 9.5 on the Richter scale. The resulting tsunami affected southern Chile, Hawaii, Japan, the Philippines, eastern New Zealand, southeast Australia, and the Aleutian Islands. Some reports list as many as 6,000 dead.

“ITEM: 1961. The Bay of Pigs invasion. The CIA launches an attempt to overthrow Castro and fails miserably and publicly. America has shown its weakness. What compelled the CIA to do this?

“ITEM: 1961. The U.S. sends 900 ‘military advisors’ to Vietnam. This begins a new type of war that America is not equipped morally or militarily to fight. What inspired this aggression?

“ITEM: 1962. The Cuban Missile Crisis. Russia parks atomic warheads in Cuba, sparking a confrontation that brings the world to the brink of nuclear war. The madness is spreading and quickly.

“ITEM: 1963. The ‘Age of Assassination’ begins with JFK and Medgar Evers. Television brings the JFK murder into everyone’s home. The idea spreads that anyone can be killed anywhere at any time. JFK’s assassin is himself killed on television. Murder is no longer a vague concept. No one is safe.

“Something came through.

“There is a pattern to reality lying underneath our perceptions. Sometimes there are those who can recognize the pattern. People like Rasputin or Nostradamus. Most of us are blissfully unaware and go about our lives like ignorant ants, but—and this is the important thing—it is not just a pattern, it is a noose. A noose that is tightening around us and this world ever harder with each new completion of the circle.

“By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles?”—Matthew 7:16.

“It’s getting worse. Ever since 1958, it has escalated. The intervals between events are getting shorter and shorter. Something is making us act this way. People are easily influenced, especially when they think that they aren’t. There will be no big event. There will be no apocalypse. There are no monsters. ‘Cthulhu’ does not exist, but the *concept* of Cthulhu does. The world will end because we contribute to it every day. One step forward, two steps back. Subtly, we are moved, shaped in the proper directions. What we think are our decisions have been made for us. Seeds have been planted that are carefully cultivated and will soon bear fruit. Those who see the pattern are removed, sacrificed like pawns on a chessboard.

“There is a deep scratching in my chest that will not go away. The more I learn, the worse it gets. ‘This evil worm that gnaws the world,’ said Dante.

“It is the force behind us, driving our actions, and it will not end until it is finished. I don’t know what it is but I know it gets more powerful every year and there is no fighting it. This thing is in our blood now, it is in our minds, it drives us relentlessly, but it is patient. Give it ten years, twenty, even fifty, and our world will be a bloodbath of wars and violence. Massacres will become commonplace and not just in war zones but in our schools and hometowns.

“‘Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold,’ said Yeats. We are rushing toward oblivion but are driven there by some obscene swineherd. The truth within me will come out of its own accord.

“God help me. I have seen the thing behind the curtain and it has seen me.”

The Red Witch of Chorazin

DARRELL SCHWEITZER

Darrell Schweitzer remarks that his career seems to be growing tentacles of late. This is recently evidenced by a collection of his Lovecraftian and weird fictions, Awaiting Strange Gods, published by Fedogan & Bremer in August 2015. His historical Cthulhu Mythos anthology, That Is Not Dead, was published by PS Publishing in 2015 and was followed in 2017 by Tales from the Miskatonic Library (coedited with John Ashmead). His stories have appeared in numerous Lovecraft-related anthologies in the past few years. He coedited Weird Tales for nineteen years and is the author of three novels, The White Isle, The Shattered Goddess, and The Mask of the Sorcerer, in addition to about 300 published stories.



MY FATHER GREW UP IN CHORAZIN, PENNSYLVANIA, and he told me a lot of stories about it when I was young, but to me they were mostly just that, stories. It's in the flyover part of the state, where nobody goes, where the roads wind between dark hills and you notice, mostly at night, that civilization is only in the valleys, and just barely, so that *anything* could be crawling for miles along those ridgelines and go unnoticed. Some of the stories were scary and some were wonderful. The town (if it was big enough to be called a town) was run by Elder Abraham, who must have brought his people there from somewhere else originally, because he was said to be a thousand years old. With him came Brother Azrael, who could make his eyes glow in the dark when he wanted to. He kept a room full of ancient scrolls and books that only he and Elder Abraham were ever allowed to look at. There was a kid in school with my dad—a little one-room schoolhouse, if you can believe it—who always went barefoot except in the very coldest weather because he could feel the dead beneath the ground that way. Of course he could do it with the palms of his hands, but going around on all fours all the time would be awkward, and in any case most of the kids went barefoot in warmer weather. It was that kind of place. So no one would have noticed even if there had been a need to hide what that kid, Jerry, did. But there wasn't. Everybody knew. His real talent was that he could sink down into the earth and "swim" underground without suffocating, the way some witches do in old stories, and he would meet the dead ancestors down there and talk with them. Sometimes he even brought them up on special occasions. Sometimes he would return with strange bones, or treasure.

Jerry was always muddy, like Pigpen in the Peanuts comic strip, but no one cared, because that was who he was and what he was. He had a sister who was a lizard girl. There was an uncle who was always found impossibly high up in trees late at night, out on the end of delicate branches where you'd think even a squirrel couldn't go; he would hoot like an owl or call out to the sky in a language nobody except Elder Abraham and Brother Azrael could understand.

And there was a walking skeleton that you *didn't* want to meet late at night; and sometimes in the dark, winged things came down out of the sky and snatched someone away. Maybe that happened. Maybe it was just something made up to keep children indoors when they needed to stay indoors.

A lot more my father wouldn't tell me. When I asked him, "Was it like belonging to a cult?" he just changed the subject.

Other things he didn't tell me included why he left or whether or not he had any particular talent of his own, like Jerry or the tree-dwelling uncle.

But he did tell me about the Red Witch, who was, I gathered, something of a legend even among the Chorazinites. She was a daughter of the people, but she became strange, even to them. She had a "discontent" that made her depart from the town and haunt the hills around it. The saying was "Look where the sun sets and the shadows begin" because if you saw the sun setting behind the hills, particularly in winter, with all the trees outlined black against the sky and the shapes of the bare branches and spaces between them outlined so clearly and so far away—if you saw the sun setting like that and it was in the *wrong place*, then it wasn't the setting sun at all. It was the Red Witch, who was clothed in fire some people said, a fire that didn't burn her but which could be deadly to anything else. If you looked at her, as you watched her moving along the ridges among the trees, you would be drawn to her. You'd want to go to her. You'd have to go. And people who went to her did not come back, so the story was.

Only, I met the Red Witch myself when I was twelve. Dad suddenly insisted that the family go on a "picnic," and off we went. He would take

no argument. *Now*. We were going on a picnic right now, in the middle of the week, when he should have been at work, and I could tell that even my mother looked at him as if he were crazy, and my baby sister Alice, who was six, just went along hoping it would be fun, and I was hoping that a really good story would come out of this.

We drove and drove, up from Philadelphia, through the Poconos and then turned left, keeping below the New York state line, where there is a great deal of nothing, just long, dark hills and dark valleys. Dad said that the Grand Canyon of Pennsylvania is in that area, and maybe we'd get to see it. We just kept on going. Mom clearly had no idea why or where and was beginning to look a little alarmed. I was almost getting bored and hungry. In the back seat with me, Alice had gone to sleep in my lap. It was almost four in the afternoon, in the late autumn, mind you, when the leaves were off the trees and it was starting to get cold and dark early.

Then suddenly, Dad pulled over onto the side, where the road curved between the hollow of two hills, a very dark and remote spot indeed. We hadn't seen another car for, like, two hours.

"Let's have a picnic!" he said, and out we all piled, rustling in the dead leaves, climbing part of the way up the hillside until we came to a large stone that made a kind of table. I remember looking up in the empty branches and thinking this would be a great place to go hunting for cocoons, which I could bring back to the science class in school, but first we got out the food and ate. We didn't say much other than things like "Please pass the pickles." There was a certain weird intensity to all this, as if it were a job that had to be done. I could tell that Mom was upset about something she wasn't saying, and Alice noticed it, and I could tell, with the result that this picnic was no fun at all, and I really just wanted to get out of there and go home.

But then Dad said he had to go off and "do something," and he walked up to the top of the hill and over it, and disappeared among the trees. I thought he'd just gone to pee, but when he didn't come back after maybe an hour, as Alice and I sat there silently, Mom said something about "business," which made no sense at all.

By now the sun was starting to go down and the woods were dark, and Alice was starting to whimper. I insisted that I should go look for Dad, and much to my surprise, as I'd expected an argument, Mom merely said softly, "Yes, go ahead."

So I went up the hill toward the ridgeline, and the sky was a lurid red in front of me, and I could see the leafless trees outlined in front of me like bare bones, and, you know, I don't think I was facing southwest at all. I think this was all in the *wrong place*, because as soon as I got over the top of the hill there was the Red Witch, waiting for me, floating in the air a few feet off the ground, wearing a long, flowing scarlet gown that was so bright it might have been made of fire. It was too bright to look upon directly, so I could only shield my eyes and see her a little better as she moved among the trees and the intervening trunks eclipsed some of the light. I saw her face clearly. Her hair floated in the air as if she were underwater. She was smiling, and it was almost a friendly smile; but there was something about her eyes that was too strange to quantify, friendly or unfriendly, good or evil. I didn't like it at all.

* * *

And my father continued along the ridgeline, following her. I know this because I *remember* it, as if in an incredibly vivid dream, but no, more than that, as if they were my own memories, as if I myself had trudged up through the tangles of sticks and briers, up as the land rose and the light before him was blinding. He groped his way forward, his face streaming with tears. But he knew what he was doing and why he had to follow and why he could not turn aside. It was all inevitable to him, like something out of a story he'd heard as a boy.

They must have gone for miles along those ridges, against the darkening sky, and the people of the valleys must have looked up and crossed themselves, or made whatever signs they make, because the sun was not setting where it was supposed to, but moving the way that no setting sun ever should.

They came to a cabin. She went in first and beckoned him to follow, and when he did follow and she shut the door behind them, at first the light was brighter than the heart of any furnace, but then it dimmed and the room grew almost dark, though there was a faint layer of fire over everything, the rough log walls, the crudely cut floor, the furniture—a table and a couple of stools—made of stumps and logs and branches. He noticed a few dishes on the shelves, a pot in the fireplace, as if in some other time, under some other conditions, someone had actually lived here. The Red Witch now was merely clothed in scarlet, with that same layer of pale fire flickering over her that was flickering over himself. He held out his hands to marvel at it. He felt no pain, no heat. He thought of the fantasy that every child has, when lying sleepily on the floor staring at burning logs in a fireplace, that the logs are hills and valleys and somewhere *beyond the fire* there is a strange country of bright, glowing air, an unreachable country that recedes to infinity, like the world on the other side of a mirror. He wondered, then, if he had somehow passed into the land of fire.

“It is hard to understand at first,” she said, as if she knew what he was thinking.

And it did not seem at all strange to him, now, at last, that she should know what he was thinking. Were they not, he thought, both part of the same dream?

“Not like that,” she said.

And she showed him some books she had stolen from Brother Azrael’s hoard. They too were covered in gentle flames. Fire danced across the pages, but did not consume. The writing glowed. Somehow it shifted before his eyes until the scripts in no language ever written on Earth became clear to him, as if his brain were arranging itself to a new setting.

I don’t know how long he stayed there or what they did, or how long she had studied those books becoming what she was. I do not know what they came to understand in the end, what incredible wisdom they gained, what arcane and tortuous rites they went through to reach a new state of being, or whatever it was.

I only know that she explained to him that if you're going to leave Chorazin at last, you have to go all the way.

And he said that it was so.

And when the time was come at last, the two of them went hand in hand to the door of the cabin and opened it, and outside there was no forest anymore, only the vastness of space, swirling stars reaching off to infinity like the country beyond a mirror.

Even this parted before them like a curtain, and there was only fire and light.

He felt both the resignation of surrender and an adventurous expectancy.

They stepped through.

* * *

And I also remember, at the age of twelve, coming down that hillside in the gathering dark and telling my mother that I couldn't find my father.

I told her he wasn't anywhere. She just said, "Then we'll have to wait, I guess," and she tried to keep me and Alice occupied by pointing out flights of birds. It was getting too dark to identify trees. For a while we watched the half-dozen deer that came out of the woods down in the hollow, at the other side of the road. But they ran off when Alice made a noise. My sister wasn't having any of this. She was tired and cold and scared.

So we drove back to Philadelphia, and my sister and I grew up without having a father.

No, I don't mean *not having a father* in the sense of his being dead, or him having deserted us, but in the sense of him never having existed at all. No explanation. I couldn't even claim to be a bastard. It is indeed very hard to understand at first, something that won't become comprehensible until you've stared for years at burning, alien lettering in strange books made out of fire, and you've probably gone mad in the process. My sister did go mad. They said it was schizophrenia. By the time she was in her teens she had to be institutionalized, and I never saw her again, because I

could not bear to, because I had a great deal of difficulty dealing with the way all those memories from the first twelve years of my life and been torn out like unwanted pages, maybe burned to ashes, in any case no longer connected by any sort of chronological coherence to the rest of my life, even as my mother sank into inexplicable, unreachable depression and despair and receded from me. I, in my adolescent rage, learned a lot of new words like “slut” and “parthenogenesis” until I got slapped up the side of the head in therapy and made to understand that if I didn’t want to go the way of my sister (or my mother: what did she know, what was she hiding, what was consuming her like a crumpled-up newspaper tossed into a fire?) I would have to learn to shut up and accept the fact that there were just a few *blanks* and contradictions in the way I constructed my life within my own head.

When I was eighteen I ran away from home. I tried to join the Army first, but they threw me out, and there followed my “living in a cardboard box in the streets of New York” period, wherein I eventually found ways to put my particular grasp of unreality into street performances, which brought me a small amount of attention in the press; whereupon I graduated from psycho-bum to wannabe poet to working in an avant-garde bookstore to street theater to, incredibly, real theater and beyond, where I could actually make a living. My backstory was so amazing and heart-warming when improved upon in endless magazines: homeless, fatherless boy from a family of lunatics becomes star of stage, screen, and the occasional TV commercial, instantly recognizable to thousands as “That guy, what’s his name? The weird one.”

“That guy,” a.k.a. William Henry Stanton (named after his imaginary father), actually did manage to steal a few moments of happiness from the jealous gods, to use an expression that doesn’t describe the situation very well. Suffice it to say that in *this* fictitious memory of my life, which is laid in upon the rest like bright pages torn from another book that do not match the surrounding text at all, I did in fact manage to settle down, marry, buy a house in the suburbs and have the statistically requisite 2.5 children.

Point Five was because my wife, Alyson, whom I loved very much, was pregnant.

Then there was Billy-Boy, who had the same string of names as I did, only we didn't want to call him "Junior." (Even he agreed that was lame.)

And my beautiful daughter, who even when she was born had a beautiful smile, so we named her after that girl in the French movie, *Amelie*. She was six. By all indications she was going to grow up to be as irresistibly charming as her namesake.

Suffice it to say that my life was actually going rather well when, by a commodius vicus of recirculation, to borrow some gibberish from my street-poet days, on a certain autumn day I was hurrying madly about the house to make sure I was ready and presentable for an important audition, when I went into the bathroom one last time, and there, in the mirror, drifting from side to side like a computer screen-saver against a dark background, was my father's face.

In the rush of things I did what I'd learned to do in my profession, ad-libbed: "Look, I'm in a hurry. Can my mental breakdown please wait?"

"Billy-Boy, this will be hard for you to understand at first," he said.

I hadn't been called that since I was twelve, in another life.

"I'll bet," I said.

I was searching my mind for another smartass reply when sudden *she* was there, the Red Witch herself, in the mirror, coming through the mirror, filling the bathroom, then the whole house with fire.

"Hello, Billy," she said.

I heard screaming. I saw my wife crumple up like a burning newspaper. I saw my beautiful daughter go off like a firework. My son was calling out to me something like *Daddy, Daddy, it hurts, make it stop*, only there was something wrong with his face; it was hollow, like a paper mask, filled with fire from the inside, disintegrating as I watched.

Then I was on the floor, on my knees, screaming, and my Alyson was shaking me by the shoulders, hard, and shouting at me, "What's wrong? What's wrong?"

And I stopped and looked around me, stunned, at the interior of the house, which was very much as it always had been, save that I'd knocked over the laundry hamper when coming out of the bathroom. No fire anywhere.

I gave her a goofy smile. "Christ, do I need a vacation—"

"Are you sure that's all it is?"

"Yeah. Yeah. Working too hard." And suddenly I was manic: "Let's go on a *picnic!!!*" And I herded and cajoled and damn near bullied the lot of them into getting ready all of a sudden, packing a few things, hustling out into the car. It was midday. We were going to have to make good time if we were going to get where we were going in time for a picnic.

"What about your audition?" Alyson said, astonished, alarmed.

"Fuck the audition. Let's go."

And we went, eastward across Connecticut, down the Hudson Valley, over the Tappan Zee Bridge, through the Delaware Water Gap and past any part of northern Pennsylvania anyone has ever heard of. All the while Alyson stared at me as if she were sure I'd lost my mind but didn't have any better idea than to play along. Billy-Boy (Junior) in the back seat was messaging steadily on his phone, no doubt telling Facebook and the world that he was being kidnapped and his father's brain had been taken over by monsters from outer space.

* * *

You don't know the half of it, kiddo, because I distinctly remembered stepping through that cabin door, hand-in-hand with the Red Witch of Chorazin, into infinity.

I remember passing from starry darkness into brilliant light into darkness again.

I remember dwelling for ten thousand years on a sunless planet, amid colossal stone memnons that slowly groaned out an almost infinite text that, if it were ever completed, I somehow understood, would mean the end of all existence.

I beheld and spoke with intelligences in the darkness, as vast and inexorable as tides, existing on such an impossible time scale that all human experience, all human history, would have been to them less than the infinitesimal flicker of an electron.

There was so much more, beyond my reach even then.

* * *

In a dark place, where the road curved in the hollow between two hills, I pulled the car off the road.

It was early winter. The leaves were off the trees. The air was cold. Not a really good day for a picnic, particularly considering how late it was.

Yet we shuffled up the hillside, found a table-like stone, ate our sandwiches.

Then I said I had to go off and do something.

My son looked at me very strangely. I think he was crying.

But I made my way up over the ridge line, into the apparent sunset, where the Red Witch was waiting, and I followed her for miles through the darkening forest, until we came to her cabin. We went in. She closed the door after us.

Inside, she opened a burning book and pointed to a passage that explained everything.

Then she said, "We have to go now."

She opened the door again. Stars. Infinity.

I closed the door and, before she could react, drew a pistol out of my pocket and emptied the magazine into her face.

"No! This is not what I want! Fuck this! I want my life back! I want Alyson and the kids and my acting career and my happiness! Not this! Not this!"

But the Red Witch only smiled at me sadly and said, "You didn't think you could break away that easily, did you? It's not like that."

Her face was like a burning paper mask, beginning to disintegrate inward from the edges.

* * *

"I'd better go look for Dad," Billy-Boy said.

"Yes, go ahead," his mother said.

* * *

If you'd rather believe my mind has been taken over by monsters from outer space, please do so now. The rest doesn't get any better.

Having emptied the pistol's magazine, still screaming, I threw the gun at her and ran out of the cabin, into the forest, right into the arms of the Skeleton Thing That You Really Don't Want to Meet in the Dark.

It had me by the hair. It yanked my head back, as if to break my neck. Its claws tore into my throat and chest. I could see its face hovering above mine like a screen-saver, drifting from side to side, mouth wide, teeth like nails, eyes burning.

It didn't say anything. Before it could, someone grabbed me by the ankles and yanked me down *into the earth* and I was being dragged through mud and stone and darkness like a drowning victim hauled by a lifeguard. Someone had his arm under my chin, and I hung limp. I felt him swimming, down, down through the dark hills beneath the roots of the forest. Somehow I could breathe or had no need of breathing. I saw, far below us, bone assemblages as huge as whales, swimming there. There were dead faces all around us, of the ancestors, who spoke in whispers I could not make out, in some language I did not understand.

Then we rose up again, out of the ground, and crawled onto a wooden porch, spitting out mud, trying to wipe the mud out of our eyes while someone poured hot water over us. I looked up then and saw a woman in an old-fashioned dress with her hair in a bun. She put down another bucket of water, dropped some towels beside them, nudged me with her foot and said, "So the prodigal returns," then added, "Clean yourself up, you two. Supper's ready."

I knew who my rescuer was: Jerry, short for Jeroboam, whose special talent was swimming beneath the ground. He was older than he'd been in the stories, when I had gone to school with him, but not nearly as old as he should have been if you tried to figure it out by adding up the years. But I didn't try to add them up. What year was it anyway? What meaning could that possibly have?

Jerry was wearing only a pair of very brief, cut-off denim shorts, the easiest to wash the mud off, presumably. My own clothing was a complete wreck, so when the two of us went inside, I had to borrow a pair of way-too-large overalls and a T-shirt. That was when Jerry's mom noticed that I really did have some nasty cuts all down my front. So she took me in the bathroom and cleaned my wounds and touched them up with iodine and alcohol. As I sat there on the edge of the bathtub, being worked on, I looked down at the damage and at my own completely hairless chest and belly. I glanced up at the mirror, afraid of what I'd see, but I saw only my own face looking back, my twelve-year-old face.

* * *

Once upon a time there was a boy who left Chorazin. He walked over the mountain, into the sunset. But he came back.

* * *

"When you leave Chorazin," the Red Witch said, "you have to leave everything behind. That truly means everything."

Her face crumpled like burning newspaper and was gone.

* * *

"No one can leave Chorazin who is *of* Chorazin," Elder Abraham said. "You can only create superfluous patterns, in which you have left, but they are like extra pages in a book. We are all temporary patterns in the black seas of nothingness, even our gods, swirls and eddies of the current. Chorazin

itself is a pattern, of which we are a part, more distinct perhaps, which may even survive for a time when the Old Gods return from the blackness in which they sleep. But nothing lasts forever. The black sea is forever.”

The Elder spoke such wisdom as is seldom shared with anyone other than Brother Azrael. He’d come to dinner. We were deeply honored, all of us. Jerry had changed into something a little more presentable, though he never did manage to get all the mud out of his hair or from between his toes.

“Even that only masks the Gate,” I said. “I think we got as far as the Gate. But we could not see beyond it.”

“Yog-Sothoth is the Gate,” said Brother Azrael.

“There are many gates,” I said.

“But all are one in Yog-Sothoth.”

* * *

In Chorazin there is a girl they have to keep chained in an attic. Her mind has completely gone. They say she has flaming red hair, but she is horribly disfigured, as if she’s been shot in the face several times.

* * *

“William,” the Elder said to me. “One day, I think, you may become the greatest of us all.”

The Oldies

NANCY KILPATRICK

Award-winning author Nancy Kilpatrick has published eighteen novels and more than two hundred short stories, and has edited fifteen anthologies, including Bram Stoker Award and Aurora Award finalist nEvermore! Both the anthology Danse Macabre and her new collection Vampyric Variations have won awards. Recent short work can be found in Searchers After Horror; The Darke Phantastique; Zombie Apocalypse: Endgame!; Blood Sisters: Vampire Stories by Women; The Madness of Cthulhu 2; Innsmouth Nightmares; and Stone Skin Bestiary. The graphic novel Nancy Kilpatrick's Vampyre Theatre has just been released.



IN ONE WAY, IT SEEMED INEVITABLE. THAT, OF course, flies in the face of the idea that we mortals can control our destiny. I used to be one of those who believed that. Now, I don't know what to believe.

What I am sure of is that I'm chilled to the bone with the underpinnings of a reality that I've skirted past all my life, a reality of not what we *know* but of one we *sense*, lying like magma just beneath the crust, pushing to erupt. We feel the heat of it, praying to whatever deities fit our upbringing, or the metaphors we have developed an interest in over a lifetime. Praying for intervention. And yet, when I think of doing that, after all I've seen, after all I've been through, such an approach seems as insane to me as the madness of the reality hovering just below our consciousness. And that's what leaves me utterly terrified, unable to sleep at night, tormented in the daylight. Questioning everything that I formerly believed, or maybe more, *hoped* existed in the universe.

How did I get to this state? Like almost everything in life, one step taken leads to the next. A choice, the road taken or "the road not taken," as Robert Frost wrote so poignantly. And then suddenly, there you are. Here I am. But it began innocently enough....

I had been friends with Kinsey for several years. We met in a therapy group, sharing Sophie, the therapist—an eclectic sort of counselor—with eleven others. Our group of thirteen 'analysands,' as Carl Jung would have called us—and indeed, Sophie had been sculpted by Jung's ideas, though she herself was not a Jungian therapist but had trained as a Freudian—settled to that number and the group remained cohesive.

We met regularly, twice a month on a Wednesday night, and initially hung out in Sophie's waiting room—with her blessing—after the two-hour sessions. That gave us a chance to get to know one another in a more relaxed and 'normal' way, though perhaps not as deeply as through the psychic flotsam and jetsam that drifted to the fore during the actual group.

We covered the range of all-female personalities: twenties to fifty-something; married, single, separated, divorced; heterosexual and lesbian and one transiting gender to male; the unemployed to the professional. Some were more introverted and tended to retreat to their homes after our bi-monthly sessions. Others had children or other dependents to look after, so they too were gone. The leftovers, without much of a social life, included Kinsey—a twenty-eight-year-old artistic woman in a relationship with the extremely patient and nurturing Henry; Cheryl—our twenty-two-year-old unemployed token in-the-making transsexual; Gwen—our token black spinster and head of nursing at a large hospital and also, at fifty-five, the oldest of the group; and myself, Cat—perennially single, good office job, on her way to becoming the Crazy Cat Lady pushing forty. The four of us frequently met for dinner between therapy weeks, or at our favorite pub, The Eleusinian Mysteries. The on-tap beer list wasn't extensive, but we got a kick out of the name.

We were all neurotic, not psychotic, at least not then, and I remember distinctly the evening we met at the pub when the problems started, when Kinsey announced, "Last night I tried to kill myself."

Gwen gasped. Cheryl gripped the edge of the table. I froze, stunned but not surprised. We all knew Kinsey as vacillating between mouse and monster, meek and angry. And highly dramatic. While we reacted in our individual ways, Kinsey's lips twisted into a smile, but her eyes turned glassy, haunted. That odd combination alone sent a chill up my spine.

Finally, Gwen asked, "What happened?"

"I got into the tub with Henry's razor, unscrewed it, took out the blade, and cut one of my wrists." She pulled up the left sleeve of her sweater, and we saw a large gauze- and medical-tape bandage wound around the wrist.

“That’s not the best way,” Cheryl blurted out, “going across the vein, I mean.”

We all understood Cheryl’s obsession with doing it the right way. Not one of us hadn’t thought of or attempted suicide in our life. All four of us had been cutters in our teens, trying to cope with too many feelings and no outlet—we had that in common—and we all understood the best way to ensure death was to cut along the vein, not across it. But, of course, that was irrelevant.

When I found my voice I asked, “What precipitated this?”

“Nothing,” Kinsey said.

“Something must have happened. Did you and Henry fight?”

“No. Not at all. We fucked after dinner, then he went to sleep for a while in his chair and woke up to watch a basketball game. I had a bubble bath—lavender. The idea just came to me in the tub, out of the blue.”

“I thought you’d given that up,” Gwen said a bit sternly, “indulging in suicidal thoughts.” None of us wanted to be judgmental, but we also didn’t want to enable Kinsey’s destructive impulses.

“I did. It just happened.”

“You’ll have to tell Sophie.”

Our next session opened with Kinsey repeating to the entire group what she’d told us. A calm and clear-eyed woman, our leader Sophie had a weight issue but, other than that, she seemed to be a paragon of sanity and a boulder we all leaned against for grounding, especially with such a dire revelation.

After Kinsey finished her tale, many exhibited or stated reactions that ranged from shock to fear to fury, some of the above accompanied by tears. Finally, Sophie said, “Kinsey, let’s go back to that night. Tell us again what happened.”

Kinsey repeated the sequence of events she’d related at the pub and just after making love with Henry, Sophie stopped her. “Did you enjoy the sexual experience?”

“Yeah. Sure. I guess.”

“Did you have an orgasm?” Beth, one of the angrier women in the group, wanted to know.

“I guess. I think.”

Sophie held up a hand to let us all know she was headed somewhere and to butt out. “Talk about what you felt.”

Kinsey took a minute. “Nothing. I felt nothing.”

“Look into that nothingness. What do you see in there?”

“Just a black hole. Where there could be something, but there isn’t.”

“A black hole has energy. It pulls things in and absorbs them.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Did you feel absorbed?”

“Maybe.”

“Let yourself be absorbed by that darkness. Don’t be afraid; we’re all here with you.”

Kinsey closed her eyes. The room fell silent. Suddenly her body jerked.

“What are you experiencing, Kinsey? Tell me what’s happening.”

More silence. More jerking. And then Kinsey’s voice, but somehow younger. “I’m in a room. It’s empty. Dark as midnight, cold like winter, no life. There’s no one here.”

“How do you feel?”

“I don’t feel anything.”

“Are you afraid?”

“No. I’m relieved. There’s no one here. Just me.”

“Do you feel safe?”

Kinsey paused. “No.”

“Why?”

“Because... I know they’re out there. And coming.”

“Who? Who is out there?”

“*The Oldies.*”

“Are these people you know?”

“They’re not people.”

That sent a wave of trepidation through the room, one that set my body to trembling.

Sophie spent the rest of our session and even went overtime trying to get Kinsey in touch with what had precipitated the suicide attempt. Every aspect Kinsey mentioned of the evening she attempted to off herself was gone over and over as she was pressed to delve into whatever feelings were there. Sophie, no doubt, hoped to get to the core of what drove Kinsey to such thoughts and action. And while at first Sophie tried to investigate *The Oldies*, Kinsey couldn't or wouldn't go near that. She couldn't define or describe or identify in any way who or what they were, only that she had encountered them before, when she was young, and she just sensed that they were coming.

Sophie left it alone and extracted a promise from Kinsey that she would phone if she felt this way again or became depressed or angry. In other words, suicidal.

It was a frustrating night for everyone, unsettling to be sure, and after our session only Kinsey and I remained in the waiting room. She looked pale to me, but then she had been put through the mill.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"Not really."

"Do you want to go for a coffee or something?"

"No. I just want to sit here for a bit."

We sat in silence for what felt to me like a long time. I didn't know what to do or say, so I said and did nothing. Finally, I looked at my watch; it was after 11 P.M. I had to get up early for an important meeting, but I didn't want to just ditch Kinsey.

Suddenly she turned her head and looked at me, the brown of her irises in the dimmer light of this room melding with the black pupils. Her face and lips were very pale now, accentuating her dark brown hair, brows and eyes, and there was something eerily ghostlike about her. "I'm not going to win against them," she said. "No one can."

"Who?" I asked, but I knew the answer.

"*The Oldies*. None of us can win. You can't win."

I don't remember what I said, but I remember trying to be reassuring and comforting, letting her know that whatever inner demons she was

encountering would *not* win, I was there to help her, the group was there to support her, Sophie was good, she would find a way, Henry loved her. All the things you say to someone who is falling apart before your eyes while at the same time you feel spooked.

That night my dreams were nightmares, littered with dark places, crammed with rooms like black holes, pervaded by a sense of someone or something unpleasant that was just on the other side of the walls. I woke three separate times in a sweat, heart racing, breathing erratic, hands trembling. Needless to say, the following day was hell for me.

I was exhausted the next night, but still I phoned Kinsey and she said she was all right. I suggested we go to the pub, and she agreed to that. I called Gwen and Cheryl. Gwen was fine with meeting for drinks, but Cheryl said she couldn't do it. It was too freaky for her. She couldn't expose herself to that much negativity.

So three of us met at The Eleusinian Mysteries. Kinsey seemed like her usual self, and that was a great relief for Gwen and me. We didn't talk much about what Kinsey had done—and she claimed it was just a fluke, it wouldn't happen again. Mostly we drank and laughed and chatted about nothing, trying to overwhelm her darkness with the light of life. Gwen and I thought it worked.

Our next group was taken up with all the feelings brought about by Kinsey's suicide attempt. We all verbalized our reactions. Kinsey said virtually nothing—what could she say? *Sorry?* That made no sense. And in therapy, the point is to deal with your *own* feelings and not the actions of the person that 'caused' those feelings in you.

Cheryl was still upset and didn't want to hang out after, but Gwen and I were ready and willing. Kinsey, though, decided to go home early. "I haven't been sleeping well. I'm tired. I think I'm catching a cold and just want to go to bed," she said.

Gwen and I stayed.

"Do you think she'll try it again?" Gwen asked.

"I hope not. She seems more stable, just, like she said, tired."

"What do you think about what she brought up last time?"

I paused. "You mean about *The Oldies*?"

"Yes."

"I don't know what to think. Sophie kind of hinted it was a psychic break that wouldn't happen again."

"Did she say it wouldn't happen again? I didn't hear that."

"No. Just me hoping."

"I hope too," Gwen said. "All this reminds me too much of my childhood."

"What do you mean?"

"You know I was born in Haiti, right?"

"Yeah. You left when you were a kid?"

"Yes. I was seven. But I remember very clearly a ceremony I saw. I went with my mother, just before she died of the cholera she'd contracted after a hurricane. It was a Vodou ceremony. They killed a chicken and smeared blood on sick people like my mother to heal them. The *Bokor*—a female priest who serves both the light and dark forces—spoke in tongues and looked as if she was out of her mind. Quite a few people looked that way. And Kinsey looked that way to me."

"Do you think Vodou is involved?"

"I don't know. I only know what I saw as a kid and what I saw two weeks ago, and it looked pretty much the same to me."

"Gee, Gwen, as far as I know, Kinsey's never had anything to do with Vodou, or any other religion. She's an avowed atheist."

"I know," Gwen said. "What I mean is, the haunted look on her face, tonight, last session... that's how the *Bokor* looked. And—"

"And what?"

"The *Bokor* talked about serving the spirits, *The Old Ones*."

That left me unnerved and led to another sleepless night.

During the next two weeks, I tried to gather our small group again at The Eleusinian Mysteries. Kinsey said she had a cold. Cheryl still needed to keep her distance. Gwen was busy with work and her granddaughter had just had her tonsils out, so Grandma felt the need to spend evenings with her.

I had plenty to keep me busy during the day, and in the evenings two non-therapy friends to connect with for the ballet and a touring musical about to close. I even had a date with Frank, a computer techie from work I'd been seeing off and on for six months or so. He wasn't the love of my life—though I doubted I'd ever find my soulmate—but it was a nice break, dinner at Chez Ennio, the latest superhero movie, sex. At least I slept that night.

Kinsey didn't show up for our next therapy session. I wondered if her cold had gotten worse. "Psychotics never get sick," I'd read in some article or book once, so I found that reassuring, even if it might not be true.

Sophie started the group with an announcement. "I need to let all of you know that Kinsey is in the hospital."

The moment of silence was palpable.

Sophie didn't pause. "She tried to commit suicide again two nights ago, this time a more serious attempt."

The next two hours were spent with group members crying or shouting or curling into near fetal balls, the gamut of emotions.

Just before we concluded, Sophie told us, "Henry said hospital visits would be welcome," and she gave us the name of the hospital.

Cheryl was a mess and rushed out after the session. Everyone else looked upset and fled for home. Gwen and I walked to the subway together without speaking. We took the train in the same direction, and as we sat in the crowded subway car she said softly, "I have a very bad feeling about this."

"Me too."

"I'll try to see her during my lunch break tomorrow, since the hospital isn't too far from my hospital."

"I'll go after work," I promised. "I guess she'll be on medication."

"Probably anti-psychotics."

This was grim news. No one in our group was on serious meds. It wasn't that Sophie was opposed to it, and she could prescribe, but it just happened that the group members' issues were not severe enough beyond short-term usage of tranquilizers or sleeping pills. At least not until recently.

Work was insane. The project I'd been involved with for weeks at the ad agency needed quite a bit of tweaking, and that took up the entire day. Frank wanted to meet on Friday, but I reminded him that a co-worker's bridal shower was that night, so I was only free on the weekend, but he would be out of town then. We arranged a tentative date for the following week. To tell the truth, I felt unenthusiastic. Clearly I was upset about Kinsey and dreaded the thought of seeing her later that night.

* * *

I walked slowly through the antiseptic-smelling corridors of the large hospital. The walls had been painted puce at one point when that color was fashionable for institutions, but now the hue looked tired and depressing.

When I reached the right floor and corridor, I saw Henry standing at the nurses' station, talking with one of the nurses. As I approached, he turned in my direction. He looked awful.

We had only met twice, briefly, at Sophie's holiday gatherings where friends and spouses were invited, but still we hugged. "How are you?" I asked.

"Holding it together."

I nodded. "And Kinsey?"

"They've got her on strong drugs. She's a bit of a zombie, so be prepared for that."

He took a break and went to the cafeteria so we could visit privately.

I entered the room to find her paler than I'd ever seen her. She was propped up in the bed, wearing the requisite pastel flowery hospital smock, her eyes more glazed than ever.

I walked to the bed and took her hand. She stared blankly at me.

"Hi," I said. "How are you doing?"

"Fine." Her hand was limp and cool. I could see that she had bandages around both wrists and up her arms. "I took Cheryl's advice," she said. "*The Oldies* told me to."

I inhaled sharply. The cuts had to have been up the veins; if she'd hit an artery, she'd be dead. And, again, talk of *The Oldies*. I didn't know what to say. Despite that, and knowing she was drugged, I asked, "How did *The Oldies* tell you to do that?"

"In a whisper," she said.

The room felt chilly to me but, obsessively, I persevered. "What did they say?"

"Do it. Just do it. *Now*."

That sounded like an ad slogan to me, and I wondered if it was something she'd heard on TV, so I asked that.

"No. The TV was off. I was in the kitchen, making dinner. Henry was on his way home from work. The cats had been fed. I was paring potatoes and carrots for a stew..."

"So... you heard them?"

"Yes. And this time I saw them too."

I felt my hand holding hers twitch and the room seemed colder. "What do they look like?"

"I don't know."

"But you saw them."

"Shapes. Big shapes. Bigger than the universe."

I was out of my depth with this and wasn't sure how to go further. Just then a nurse came in to take readings of blood pressure, oxygen saturation, and so on, and saved me.

I waited out in the corridor with Henry. "Did she mention *The Oldies* to you?"

"Yes," he said, his face and voice tense with worry.

"What do you make of it?"

"The doctor here said she had a psychotic break. They have her on anti-depressants."

"What do they say about her prognosis?"

"They feel it's good. These meds have been prescribed a lot and have a record of working on this kind of illness with few side effects."

I wasn't so sure. And why I had doubts, I didn't know at that time.

We went back into the room together and I stayed another uncomfortable twenty minutes, avoiding the subject of *The Oldies*. I did, however, mention it privately to Sophie, who told me she'd been to see Kinsey several times and had the same information.

To say I felt unnerved would be an understatement. But life goes on, and while I did visit Kinsey twice more before she was released from the hospital, we didn't talk about anything contentious again.

Henry, a teacher, took a leave of absence from his job to stay with her 24/7. I hoped for the best but feared the worst.

* * *

Four months later, Kinsey rejoined the group. She had been doing individual counseling with Sophie during that time, which must have helped her, because she looked better. Her face had regained some color, and while she seemed a little stilted, there was something of the old Kinsey in the way her full lips smiled and how she spoke.

Sophie cautioned us that although there were many emotions that needed to be expressed, we couldn't do it all at once, and Kinsey couldn't take a barrage, so we would need to move slowly over the next few sessions.

Kinsey looked to be heavily medicated and yet functional, to a degree. It had been, she said, her decision to return to the group.

"I wanted to explain to you all why what happened happened," she said, her voice flat, her eyes flat, her skin suddenly paling to an unhealthy pallor, and I began to worry.

"The voices have been with me since childhood. I heard them as far back as I can remember. They weren't voices I knew, and they talked like adults, chatting to one another, mostly ignoring me. Sometimes they told me things I should do and I did them and that got me into trouble. When I was young, I talked to them, even when they ignored me, but my parents tried to put a stop to that, telling me they were imaginary friends and I needed to find real friends and would in school.

“I’ve heard them all my life. They seem to be everywhere and speak whenever they want to. I can be alone or with people, when I’m painting, at a concert, reading a book, at a ball game with Henry. Having sex. They still tell me what to do and I don’t feel I can go against them. I’ve tried... it doesn’t work out well.”

She held up her wrists showing us the angry red wounds.

“They don’t just tell me what to do, they also like to tell me things, as if they’re teachers educating me. Like about the universe and how empty it is. Not empty of stars and planets but empty of meaning. They say there’s no god, just them, and that we humans are nothing at all, specks of dust. Less even, meaningless, and they only come to us for their amusement, but we’re not always amusing and we’re not that interesting.”

She stopped and everyone seemed to hold their breath until Sophie asked, “What do they mean by their ‘amusement’?”

“I don’t know, but I’ve felt that for them it’s like us watching a movie or TV show or even sitting in a cafe watching people. It’s something to do.”

“Yet they manipulate you.”

“I guess. They say it’s for my good, what they suggest.”

“Do you think it’s for your good?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. They tell me that life is pain and there’s no point in continuing. That’s what some of them say. Others say I should keep going, because you never know what’s around the corner.”

She paused, and I know many of us wanted to question her further; but at this point, getting the whole story out was probably the best way to go, or so it seemed then.

“One thing I do know—they’re not happy that I talk about them.”

“Why?” Sophie asked.

“Because.” She paused again, looked down, and when she looked up her face was different. Her eyes looked like glass eyes and held a kind of inhuman, demonic glint. Blood had rushed to her pale face, turning it almost crimson, and her full lips had formed a rictus exposing her teeth. “They say that some of you hear them, but you try to block them. Anyway, you can’t block them. They’re too powerful. They control everything,

everywhere, every one of you. And they can prove it even though they don't have to prove anything, but they want to, just for fun."

"What does that mean, 'just for fun'?" Sophie asked.

Kinsey looked down again and reached into her shoulder bag. When she looked up, she not only *looked* different, but now seemed like a completely different person, one none of us knew.

She pulled from her bag a large knife. Everyone seated around her stood and most fled to the door or the corners or anywhere to get away from her.

"Put down the knife!" Sophie, standing, said firmly. "Kinsey, put it on the floor."

"I'm not Kinsey," she said, her voice lower, and now she was talking with an accent. A German accent. Her face seemed more angular. "*Ich bin Hitler! Sieg Heil* to me!" She thrust out her arm holding the knife.

Sophie approached her cautiously.

Then Kinsey's voice changed again, and her skin seemed to darken. She spoke with the accent of an African speaking English, the tone jovial—at first. "You know me, Idi Amin Dada, your friend. And I, I know you very well, all of you, my girls. Come!" Suddenly the tone hardened. "I put your heads in my freezer!"

Then a Spaniard speaking an accented, staccato English. "You are all guilty! Confess! Confess to Tomás de Torquemada. If you are guilty you die slowly and painfully; if you are innocent you die the same!"

Amidst the horror of a succession of continuing voice changes of the madmen of history, I don't know where I gathered the courage, but I came up behind Kinsey on her right. At the same time, Gwen came from her other side. Together with Sophie, the three of us were encasing Kinsey, whose back was to the wall. But we were wary; she spun from side to side waving the knife at each of us, slashing out, all the while Sophie trying to talk her down.

"We're on your side, Kinsey. We'll help you. We're your friends. You need to put down the knife and we can help you."

Kinsey became still as a statue and this, to me, was one of the most alarming moments because she looked like a standing corpse. Instinctively,

Gwen and I both inched closer to within just a couple of feet from her. Our eyes met in understanding and we were about to grab her arms. Instantly, she snapped her head left, then right, over and over, the inhuman deranged look stopping us in our tracks. Finally her psycho eyes fixed on Sophie.

Suddenly, a macabre, otherworldly sound reminiscent of hollow laughter erupted from her. The voices mixed together, joined by others, as if dozens were speaking and laughing at once, none of them Kinsey, and it was terrifying. “Kill her!” “Kill them!” “Kill them all now!” “Drop the knife, Kinsey. Everyone loves you.” (The last voice imitating Sophie’s.)

Then the unthinkable happened. Kinsey still pointed the knife blade at Sophie. In a fraction of a second, she turned the blade inward and stabbed it into her heart.

Screams filled the room. Pandemonium ensued. I remember holding Kinsey. Blood all over her. Over me. On the floor. Shrieks coming from Kinsey. Gwen keeping the knife in place to prevent further damage. Sophie talking to Kinsey. Everyone dialing 911 on their cell phones...

I was told the ambulance arrived within minutes, but at the time it seemed to take forever. Many of the group fled. Gwen and I stayed until they took Kinsey away. And all the while Kinsey sobbed, “They didn’t want me to tell. They said not to. I did anyway. I shouldn’t have. They don’t want to be known except on their terms.”

While the situation was sharp in my mind for many days afterward, over time the details have blurred. I know that Sophie went to the hospital with Kinsey. Gwen and I were rattled and we talked and talked but nothing made sense at all. It took me more than a week to visit Kinsey because I was in a state of deep shock.

I entered the room in the hospital’s psych ward agitated. Kinsey had never looked so clear-eyed, so sane. And yet what she said by way of a greeting was anything but. “They came to me finally. I could see and feel and hear them, so it’s all good now. I think it’s easier now, if you know what I mean.”

“I don’t,” I said. My nurturing instinct was pushing to take control, but my decisive brain, which had spent days analyzing the situation and my

role in it, was determined to be the leader this once and keep my emotions from ruling me.

“I’m free now,” she said, a beatific smile lighting her pallid face.

Henry had told me that the knife missed her heart by a mere two inches, but punctured a lung. He was at his wit’s end, he said. He didn’t know what to do. Sophie recommended that Kinsey be placed in a facility for a while where they watched suicidal patients 24/7. Henry wasn’t sure about that. He didn’t like the idea of her “being locked in a back ward somewhere.” He felt Kinsey belonged with him, in his care rather than in a cold institution. By his side, he said, was the best way to go. He was taking a long leave of absence and preparing for them to go into the woods together where things were always better, camping for an extended time, connecting with nature, the way they used to, where Kinsey felt safe and sane.

I wasn’t convinced of his plan. But then, I saw no alternative. But one thing I knew for certain—I had been traumatized. Something in me cracked at the core as I watched her taken over by *The Oldies* and stab herself with a six-inch carving knife. The horror of it was too much. I’d reached my limit and I knew that to be in touch with her, with this, again, would destroy me. I’d come to tell her that.

“Kinsey, I need to say something.”

She nodded.

“I think of you as a friend, and I’ve tried to be a friend. But I can’t handle this. This is too dreadful. It’s beyond what I can cope with. I love you as my friend, but I can’t be around you.”

She didn’t look upset or sorry. She just said, “*The Oldies* told me you would say that. Goodbye, Cat.” And she smiled.

Disconcerted, I mumbled, “I wish you the best,” turned and headed for the door. Only to hear a sound follow me out that sent waves of horror flooding into every pore of my body aiming for my soul. Multiple voices. Deep. Laughing. The same macabre *laughter* as when she had stabbed herself, aiming to sever her heart.

The inhumanity of the hollowness was so alien I had the sense that no person had ever encountered it before. Certainly I hadn't. My instinct was to flee, or to turn, to see *The Oldies* with my own eyes, however they manifested themselves. I fought the latter instinct, hard. Instead, I hurried out the door, carrying the reverberation with me clouded by the scent, because a foul and offensive odor clotted the air. Beyond decay. The combination of everything brought a word to my mind and I whispered it: "Entropy."

* * *

Life has not been easy for me since. The group continued but with immediate dropouts—our numbers fell to seven—then more left as we tried to dissect *ad nauseam* what we felt about Kinsey, about what happened. There was no rationalizing the sheer, all-pervasive horror we had experienced collectively and individually.

As we struggled to make sense of it, many ideas and concepts were discussed. Gwen brought up Vodou. Someone with a Catholic background elaborated on demon possession. Schizophrenia was covered. None of it felt like a comprehensive answer. The closest to resolution I came was when Sophie talked about Carl Jung's thoughts on the dark side of the archetype energy we call *God*.

Then, one night, Sophie told the four remaining in the group that when Kinsey was released from hospital the week before into Henry's care, he began preparing for their extended camping trip in the woods. Last Friday evening, the night before they were to leave, she disappeared. The police searched everywhere. Officers were waiting in the outer room to question us, which they did, but we had no new information or even guesses to offer as to her whereabouts. After the group, Gwen and I headed to The Eleusinian Mysteries, but Kinsey was not there. She seemed to have vanished.

The funny thing is, somehow I already knew all this. I'd gotten home from work exhausted that Friday and after I fed Lucy and Allan, my two

Siamese cats, I opted for a nap before dinner. I dreamed of the smell, and the hollow, alien sound. The nightmare woke me at 8:30 P.M. Sophie told us that Henry noticed Kinsey missing around 9 P.M.

Shortly after that night, our therapy group disbanded. Despite the monstrous events that had occurred, I was sad to see the end. I felt that I had gleaned some good things over the three years. Gwen and I have kept up a friendship of sorts, although we only see each other once every six or eight weeks or so, and we never meet at The Eleusinian Mysteries.

As the seasons switched from spring to summer to fall to winter, then back to spring, my life took a few more unexpected twists and turns. Frank proposed and I said no. A month later, he married someone else. I quit my job for one with slightly lower pay but much less stress. And I acquired another cat, a black rescue already named Darkness who resisted a name change, and found myself well on the road to Crazy Cat Ladyhood.

I felt I had reached some stability. Not happiness, but then that was a goal I'd given up on long ago. That I'd reached a plateau would be a more realistic statement. Life was not bad and not good. I had some financial security and was still young enough to date, should I ever have the opportunity or the inclination. Besides my cats, I had other interests like theater and a pottery class, my two non-therapy friends for the occasional dinners and shows. I felt emotionally flatlined, but I didn't mind that. Kinsey popped up in my thoughts now and again, the unpleasant feelings blanketed by time.

Until the Saturday when Gwen phoned. "Have you seen the news today?"

I said I hadn't.

"Go look. Then phone me back."

In trepidation, I went to the Internet and found what I knew she was referring to. The bones of a woman had been discovered in the woods north of the city. Experts believed she had been there since the previous spring, animals and insects having at the corpse, plus the elements of a year's worth of heat and cold decomposing the flesh until only bone remained. Dental records provided an identity—it was Kinsey.

I sat back shocked. This was not expected but, at the same time, not unexpected. There'd been no word of her, no sign since the night she'd left almost a year ago, her purse and credit cards abandoned on her dresser, wearing brown slacks, a white blouse, and leather jacket and boots, the remnants of which were found with the bones.

What I hadn't anticipated was what would happen next.

Within a week of the news, Sophie sent an email that she was retiring and moving to Europe, an undisclosed country, offering no contact information. The last time I saw Gwen was a week after her phone call. We met at The Eleusinian Mysteries for old times' sake to "have a drink to Kinsey." And while we talked about her, about the news, about the past, about the anguish we both felt, Gwen and I did not discuss the future. I could see from her haunted eyes what she likely saw in mine—*The Oldies*.

Since the night I read about Kinsey's remains, *The Oldies* have been coming to me in odoriferous nightmares, voices masked, words vague, the many hollow sounds unintelligible, layered one upon another, alien cries and laughter and emotions I cannot understand or identify, that scrape at my soul like a thousand knife points. *The Oldies* whisper to me, night and day, whenever they feel like it, playing games with my mind, pulling me this way, that way, and in ways I could never have envisioned until I am dizzy and drunk and scared by the confusion. When I can think clearly, they seem like demonic, all-powerful children. They remind me of a clowder of cats, frustrated and bored when the prey succumbs. Kinsey's demise has left them with no one to play with; I am the new toy.

I try to ignore them. I tell them to shut up. I weep in despair, beg them to leave me in peace, scream out my rage at being violated. My music and TV volume are cranked to the point where my neighbors bang on the walls. Nothing works. I can still hear them, smell them, sense them, everywhere.

I don't know how this will end, how it *can* end. I resist the urge to do myself in, but I feel I'm being worn down. My destiny is no longer in my hands and my fate seems inevitable. Because Kinsey did, I know I will see them; and when I do, it will mean my annihilation. That's the game they

play. It's all a game, and one I can't win. No one can win. You can't win either.

Voodoo

STEPHEN WOODWORTH

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“HARTRES,” BLAISDELL SAID AS HE CLIMBED INTO the cab. He pronounced the street name as if it were the celebrated cathedral, with a soft *sh* at the beginning and a trilled *r* at the end.

“I beg your pardon, sir?” The driver, a young Arabic man, glanced at Blaisdell’s frown in the rearview mirror and laughed. “Oh! You mean ‘Charters.’”

“I suppose I do.” Arlen Blaisdell, who’d conversed in French on five continents—from Haiti to Guiana to Switzerland to the Côte d’Ivoire to Vietnam—could not fathom how a metropolis that called itself New Orleans could so mangle the Gallic tongue. Even the local name for the French Quarter—the *Vieux Carré*, or “Old Square”—had become slurred into “Voo Carré.” In the land of the Cajun and the Creole, Blaisdell had found that speaking *le vrai français* was more of a hindrance than a help.

Ce n’est pas Paris, n’est-ce pas? he heard Garston chuckle in his memory. It was their running joke back when they were grad students in Port-au-Prince every time the roof of their hostel leaked rain onto their anthropology texts or fleas infested their mattresses.

At the thought of Garston, Blaisdell stopped fanning himself with the manila envelope he carried, which contained the crime scene photos of his late friend’s remains. Even inside the cab, the mid-August humidity broiled Blaisdell until his skin crawled with festering sweat. Though any breeze was welcome, he laid the envelope on his lap out of respect for the dead.

“We had nothing to do with this,” the priestess had told him, her brown face stern, when he’d visited the nearby temple and showed her the images. “Our spirits would never command us to do such a thing.”

Blaisdell spread his hand on the envelope. Spirits may not have done such a thing, but someone had, and he needed to find out who and why.

The taxi slunk through narrow lanes constricted by ranks of manses in the vintage Louisiana style, Spanish iron grillwork masking Greek Revival masonry. Some of them were original, others merely tarted-up facsimiles. Souvenir shops sold Mardi Gras costumes and plastic beads, voodoo dolls and gris-gris bags, most imported from China. Pop culture had long ago appropriated New Orleans's style, and in turn New Orleans had done its best to mimic what the culture expected it to be, until the real city lay veiled beneath a veneer of the phony and the fatuous. Perhaps, Blaisdell fretted, he'd come all this way for nothing...

The cab disgorged him on a desolate corner of "Charters." Hardly anyone walked the streets. It was the off-season, when tourists abandoned the city to its heat and palmetto bugs. No jazz billowed from the bars to freshen the air, which congealed in stultifying silence. A lone black man strode down the opposite side of the lane. Despite the heat, he walked quickly, glancing up at the jaundiced haze of the late-afternoon sky as he went.

Blaisdell could almost feel the barometric pressure plunging. The National Weather Service had reported a tropical storm brewing in the Gulf and said it might achieve hurricane strength by the time it made landfall. Of all the ghosts that haunted New Orleans, the only one the locals truly feared was named Katrina. He knew he ought to dispense with this nonsense and get back to his hotel, but he would feel like a complete fool if he left without any of the answers he sought.

He consulted the small map of the French Quarter he carried in the breast pocket of his light linen suit. The cab had overshot his destination by about three blocks, so he backtracked along Chartres to the appropriate cross street and turned right. The praline shop on the corner had already rolled down its metal doors an hour ahead of its scheduled closing time. Next to that, Blaisdell saw what he at first mistook for a dilapidated thrift store. So much dust filmed the front window that its tableau of manikins seemed to perform its dumb show in a permanent fog. Only the painted

circus-font letters on the glass distinguished the establishment from its neighbors: “LEGRASSE MUSEUM of NATIVE BELIEFS.”

Blaisdell rechecked both the location on the map and the name and address he’d researched online, hoping there was some mistake. He couldn’t tell if the place was open—the interior looked dark, deserted. With a sigh, Blaisdell pulled on the glass door of the entrance and found it unlocked.

A bell bobbed on a coiled spring as the door swung open, its jingle jarring in the afternoon’s thick stillness. Blaisdell entered a cramped foyer lit by a single incandescent bulb overhead. An iron ceiling fan stirred the sodden air, as useless as the propeller of a sunken ship.

A fat man with a wispy brown mustache sat at a folding card table beside the open archway that led into the museum’s main chamber. He bowed his head over a notebook, motionless; sweat had so glossed the pocked surface of his bald scalp that Blaisdell at first mistook him for a wax figure, a diorama dummy like those he’d seen in the front window. Perspiration stained the underarms of the man’s short-sleeved Oxford shirt.

“Five dollars,” he said without looking up. “And we close in twenty minutes.” He had the accent of a New Orleans native—not the Tennessee Williams drawl they used in movies, but rather a clipped, nasal tone with flat vowels, like something you’d hear in Boston or the Bronx.

“Ah! Of course.” Tucking the manila envelope under his arm, Blaisdell took a ten from his wallet and offered it to the proprietor. The man ignored it and kept scrawling in his notebook, so Blaisdell left the bill on the card table without waiting for change.

Not knowing how to broach the real subject of his visit, Blaisdell milled about the miserable little museum and despaired, for it seemed merely another lowbrow tourist trap, exploiting regional culture with cheap sensationalism for the curious and clueless. Clumsy effigies represented the *loa*, the mercurial spirits of Haitian tradition. There stood Baron Samedi and Maman Brigitte, master and mistress of the dead, with their painted skeletal faces and thrift-store funereal finery, as stiff as figurines from a giant wedding cake. The cruel and fearsome Marinette, a sorceress of fire and the

protector of werewolves, might as well have been called Marionette: her spindly arms were flung above her head as if dangling from strings as she posed among flames of red aluminum foil. A stuffed Siberian husky served as one of the *loup-garous* at her command. An ancient, emaciated black man with a wide-brimmed straw hat—apparently intended to represent Papa Legba, the fatherly *loa* who served as an intermediary between the human and spirit worlds—had what must have been a nylon Santa beard glued to his face. The Legba figure bowed its head, evidently preparing to possess a counterfeit *houngan* priest, who writhed in religious ecstasy on the floor before him.

The displays all looked so slapdash and ill-kept that they seemed to express a silent contempt for their subjects. The entire building smelled of plaster dust and mildew, and the flecked dust on Baron Samedi's black frock coat bore a discomfiting resemblance to dandruff. Blaisdell spared only a cursory glance at the yellowed, typewritten placards taped to the wall that gave terse explanations of each exhibit. Only after skimming several of the paragraphs did he realize what struck him so odd about them.

Like the peculiar name of the museum itself, the capsule descriptions never used the word *voodoo*.

Dispirited, Blaisdell moved toward the exit. As he passed through the archway, he glanced toward the man at the card table again, and his gaze happened to fall upon the man's open notebook. Rows of glyphs cramped its graph-paper pages: a *mélange* of wedge-shaped hash-marks and spattered dots that looked like a cross between cuneiform and Braille. Despite a lifetime of studying languages both living and dead, Blaisdell had seen writing like this only once, among the papers that Garston had left behind after his death.

"Mister... Legrasse?" Blaisdell ventured.

The museum proprietor slapped his pulpy hand over the text he'd scribbled, like a schoolboy who fears a classmate might be copying him. "*Doctor Legrasse*," he corrected.

"Yes, of course." Blaisdell cleared his throat. "I believe you corresponded with a colleague of mine from Princeton. Morris Garston?"

Legrasse's pale gray eyes narrowed. "I recognize the name."

"He consulted you about certain voodoo rituals—"

"*Rituals*, yes." Again, the remonstrative tone.

"Did any of them involve"—Blaisdell did not want to be melodramatic but saw no way around it—"human sacrifice?"

Legrasse gave him a withering look. "There is no history of human sacrifice in either Haitian or Louisianan native beliefs. Good day, Mister..."

"*Doctor* Blaisdell. I heard as much from the priestess at the voodoo temple."

Legrasse hacked out a laugh. "Ha! *Voodoo*. A handful of half-truths cluttered with a bunch of Catholic claptrap. Even the name is a corruption."

Blaisdell pursed his lips to keep from commenting on the arrogance of a white man denouncing and dismissing an entire ethnic religion. He presumed Legrasse sneered at the word voodoo because he favored one of the many variant spellings and pronunciations: *vodou*, *vodun*, *vodoun*, *voudoun*, *vodú*. There was some debate over which term was the most historically appropriate, and it was the sort of thing academics loved to argue over at cocktail parties.

"Still, regardless of whether you agree with their beliefs, you can't deny that this region has spawned some unusual cult behavior," Blaisdell said, striving to remain respectful. "I understand that your own great-grandfather found—"

"My great-grandfather was a fool. He glimpsed a cosmic truth, then spent the rest of his life trying to forget it. And the followers of 'voodoo' are no better." He jerked a thumb toward the displays Blaisdell had just viewed. "They take the elemental entities of the universe and turn them into anthropomorphic cartoon characters. They want to peep beneath the world's veil, but they're too afraid to cast it off."

"Morris Garston wasn't." Blaisdell took the manila envelope from beneath his arm. "I don't know how much he told you about his work. After it was discovered that zombification had a scientific basis in the use of

neurotoxins by voodoo priests, Morris became convinced that psychoactive drugs also played a role in rituals involving possession by the *loa*.”

“Yes, your friend Garston understood better than most.” For the first time in the conversation, Legrasse seemed interested. “Voodoo teaches that the *loa* come from outside, that they ‘ride’ us like horses. But Garston knew the truth—the *loa* come from within. The space inside.” He tapped the center of his forehead. “You need the proper words to focus your mind, though, and call them forth. The Old Language.” He stroked the open page of his notebook absently.

“I gather that’s what you provided Morris.” Blaisdell opened the envelope, pulled out the 8 × 10 black-and-white prints. “He had just come back from research trips to Africa and Haiti, very excited. He was certain he’d found the key ingredients with which to formulate the drug, a psychedelic entheogen that he believed stimulated the pineal gland in the brain.

“Then, about a week after his return, this happened.”

Blaisdell flipped the first photo around for Legrasse to see. It depicted an aerial view, taken from police helicopter, of a stand of pines in the Herrontown Woods Arboretum near Princeton. The center of the grove resembled a miniature version of Russia’s Tunguska impact site, with tree trunks flattened like matchsticks, fanned out in a circle around a tiny form that was barely visible at the center.

Legrasse feigned nonchalance, but a vein throbbed visibly on his brow. “And Garston... he was involved somehow?”

“You tell me.” Blaisdell turned over the second photo, which was a closer shot of the vaguely humanoid figure at the circle’s center. Man-shaped but flat, like an Egyptian hieroglyph, it could have easily been mistaken for an item of discarded clothing, a rumpled outfit laid out to dry in the sun. Only upon closer scrutiny did one see the face, the genitals, the arms with hands like flaccid gloves. The flayed flesh of a sloughed human skin. A ragged tear split the hide from crown to crotch. The body itself had, as yet, not been found.

The circumstances of the death nonplussed the police, but as soon as they heard about the strange, secret drug Garston had been seeking, they assumed he must have run afoul of drug dealers. They dismissed as mere tabloid sensationalism any speculation that the murder might have been some sort of cult killing.

Blaisdell wasn't so sure.

"Do you know who might have done this?" he asked, handing Legrasse the third and final photo. It was a close-up of what was left of Garston's face, its nose and ears and chin pancaked into what looked like a Cubist portrait. Despite the deformation, Blaisdell still recognized his friend—the curly, unkempt hair going to gray, the patchy stubble on the jaw that never quite became a full beard.

"Oh, yes, I know who did it." Legrasse reddened as he pored over the pictures, sweating more than ever, fat cheeks quivering with outrage and an expression of bizarre, petulant envy. "Forty years I searched—forty years—and *Garston* gets to it first. He promised me if I helped—he *swore*..."

Legrasse cut off his muttering, looked up at Blaisdell. His gaze cooled to freezing. "This drug—do you have it?"

Blaisdell almost blurted the truth. No, of course he didn't have it. Morris had bragged about the drug but had never even shown it to him.

"I don't have it with me," Blaisdell said instead. "But I have some at my hotel."

Legrasse moistened his lips. "If you bring me the drug, I'll do better than tell you what happened to Garston. I'll *show* you."

Blaisdell's heart stuttered. He did not want to see another man butchered, particularly if *he* was that man. Legrasse might well be insane. Yet he clearly knew something about Morris's death, and this might be Blaisdell's only opportunity to find out what it was.

"I can be back in twenty minutes." He barely waited for Legrasse to nod before bolting out the door.

Blaisdell exited in such haste that he collided with a hulking individual on the sidewalk just outside the museum. The figure he'd run into was so tall that Blaisdell had to crane his neck upward to see its face. A Venetian-

style mask of glazed white porcelain peered down at him with blank black eyeholes, its expression neither tragic nor comic, merely impassive.

Though Mardi Gras was the traditional time for Carnivale-style masquerade, New Orleans hosted so many parties and festivals that one might see costumed revelers there nearly any time of year. The masked figure was clearly one of them. Its size had startled Blaisdell, but it wore what seemed to be a harlequin's outfit crisscrossed with diamonds of green and purple, the city's trademark colors, with a matching coxcomb from which four belled tassels curled. As Blaisdell gazed up at the blank porcelain visage above him, he saw that in addition to the two conventional eyeholes, another had been added in the center of the forehead, as if to accommodate the spiritual "third eye" of Hinduism and other Eastern religions.

"Excuse me," Blaisdell apologized, and attempted to step around the costumed stranger.

In reply, the figure seemed to turn its head *all the way around*, so that another, identical white mask now peered down at him.

Perhaps the stranger had his back to Blaisdell before. It was difficult to tell: the harlequin outfit appeared to be a shapeless cassock, with neither sleeves nor legs to indicate the orientation of the body. But Blaisdell was sure that only the head had twisted, owl-like, while the rest of the figure remained still. The effect must have been part of the costume—a cunning gimmick, like those trick boxes he'd seen magicians use to create the illusion that their heads could rotate full-circle.

Yet, as he stepped around the queer jester, he could not shake the uncanny impression that the three eyeholes on each of the thing's two false faces all glared at him as he passed. The sensation was so strong that he had taken fewer than a half-dozen steps before he glanced back, certain he would catch the harlequin staring at him.

The sidewalk behind him was vacant. A bell jingled as the glass door of the museum eased shut. Either the bell on the door or the bell of a fool's coxcomb—Blaisdell couldn't be sure. Perhaps both.

He had little time to wonder, for he needed to find some phony drug to bring back to Legrasse. Blaisdell considered going to a pharmacy and buying a bottle of some nutritional supplement, but felt sure Legrasse would see through such a ruse immediately. It couldn't be a prefabricated pill. No, it had to look like a botanical intoxicant that a native of Haiti or Africa could find in the forest, something akin to peyote or psilocybin mushrooms.

Blaisdell stepped out into the nearly barren lane and felt the first spittle of rain on his face. Peering up and down the street in desperation, he spotted one of the French Quarter's lurid souvenir shops, the sign above its door promising "VOODOO" in giant letters that looked like dripping green candles. A young black woman in a tank-top with a skull on it stood before the entrance, pulling the metal security door shut with a chain.

"Excuse me! Miss?" Blaisdell waved and ran up to her. "Wait!"

"Mister, we gotta close." She nodded toward the sky, which had darkened to the color of soot.

Blaisdell fished out his wallet, pulled what cash he had from it. "Here—here's eighty-four dollars. I'll only be a couple of minutes."

She rolled her eyes, but took the money and opened the metal door again.

The shop still smelled of patchouli from recently extinguished incense. In addition to T-shirts and candles, the place sold cellophane envelopes of herbs and roots for casting spells and making gris-gris bags, and Blaisdell selected the first item he saw that could pass for a controlled substance. It turned out to be mugwort, a handful of dried brownish-green leaves that resembled a hybrid of hashish and parsley. Would Legrasse recognize it for what it really was? Would he want to sample the "drug" before telling Blaisdell about Garston's death?

Perhaps, but Blaisdell didn't have any better plan, so he asked the shopkeeper for a small glass phial into which he poured the flakes of mugwort leaves.

Wind lashed Blaisdell's face with raindrops as he ran through the vacant avenues back to Legrasse's museum. He yanked the glass door open and skidded over the threshold, his water-slicked shoes slippery on the

cement floor. No one answered the jangling bell, however, and the card table in the entryway was bare. Even Legrasse's notebook was gone.

Blaisdell checked the museum's other small rooms including the lavatory, but the building's only residents were the shabby *loa* manikins. Thinking Legrasse had stepped out for a smoke, Blaisdell blustered back out into the street, hoping to catch him.

Rainwater drizzled into his eyes, so that he could barely keep them open. Through the shimmering curtains of precipitation, he could just distinguish two figures far up the lane, making their way northward toward Basin Street. Blaisdell could not be certain that the shorter of the two individuals was Legrasse, but there was no mistaking the taller, hulking form in its motley robe and belled cap.

He sprinted after them, cutting across intersections and plashing through gutters to keep them in sight. The rain sheeted down, gusting into his face, saturating his suit until it clung to him like seaweed. When Blaisdell rounded the corner of Basin Street, the two figures had disappeared. All he saw were the ghostly ramparts of the white wall that bordered St. Louis Cemetery #1.

Ordinarily, a phalanx of vagrants would have lined up outside the wall to cadge a handout from the tourists who visited the city's oldest and most famous graveyard, but the torrential downpour had driven the panhandlers away. Even the cemetery's guard had apparently locked up and left in advance of the storm. But the entrance stood open and unattended, its right-hand gate now canted on one hinge, the padlock hanging from broken chains.

Blaisdell advanced into the cemetery warily, afraid of losing his quarry, afraid of finding them. Unlike its more affluent sister cemeteries, St. Louis #1 looked more like slum housing for corpses. Rather than grassy, cypress-shaded family plots with carved angels and Greco-Roman tombs, the densely packed mausoleums were tenement blocks of graffiti-marred brick with mud and gravel on the narrow paths between.

Lagging at a discreet distance, Blaisdell spotted the two figures he'd seen earlier. They wound their way between the crypts, the taller one in

the lead, until they neared the tomb that may or may not have held the remains of Marie Laveau, who was renowned as a voodoo queen but may have been simply a clever hairdresser. The tall harlequin stopped, and its shorter companion stripped naked and knelt before it in the pelting rain.

Crouching behind a mausoleum several yards away, Blaisdell could clearly see from the bald pate and fleshy paunch that the supplicant was Legrasse. They must have come here because it was the nearest spot in the city where they could be sure their meeting would not be interrupted.

The harlequin emitted a sonorous, wavering hum—a vibration that Blaisdell could feel in his back molars—punctuated by guttural clicks, and Legrasse did his best to imitate the sounds with his own crude vocalizations. The costumed figure lifted a fold of its robe, and Legrasse reached up to take a proffered object: a hypodermic syringe.

Blaisdell let the phial of mugwort slip from his clenched fist. The genuine drug had to be in that needle, and it could only have come from one person.

He promised me if I helped—he swore...

Garston had always been a man of his word.

“Morris!” Blaisdell yelled.

As before, the harlequin turned its head so that one of its blank faces peered at him with its three hollow eyes.

But the ritual did not stop. Legrasse now had his chance to be more than a seedy dime-museum impresario, and Blaisdell could tell he was determined to go through with it. No more funhouse fakery; he would see the real *loa*.

Legrasse plunged the hypodermic’s needle into a vein of his left arm and shut his eyes in an expectant ecstasy, still murmuring the strange invocation. He remained that way for several minutes after the injection, seemingly suspended in a religious trance. Then his eyes popped open in an expression of terrified surprise, such as a puppet might have made if it could feel the hand moving inside it.

A red split opened on the crown of his scalp, and Legrasse’s face peeled away like cheap latex. What emerged was not the blood, bone, and sinew

one would expect, but rather a viscous crimson ectoplasm that squeezed out of Legrasse's flesh like paste from a tube. It welled up and unfolded into a rose whose petals consisted of forked red tongues. A three-lobed translucent orb bobbed on the liquid surface of the coagulating creature, the eye migrating this way and that to survey its surroundings. The tear in Legrasse's skin unzipped his belly, and a thicket of quivering burgundy cilia spilled out, clicking and humming.

As the remainder of Legrasse slid off into a soggy heap, the *loa*, if that's what one could call it, surged in stature to the height of its companion. At the same time, the thing that had once been Morris Garston evidently saw no need to perpetuate its charade of humanity, so the prehensile cilia tore free of the motley robe and the two-faced porcelain mask shattered as its tongue-petal rose burst forth. The tasseled jester's cap tumbled off with an incongruous tinkling of bells.

At that point, Blaisdell might have fled. But, really, where could he go? If such things existed, there could be no escape. Deep in the pit of his being—in the “space inside”—Blaisdell fancied he could sense something gnawing and champing, yearning to shed the costume of his flesh.

Now he understood what Legrasse had meant when he called the word voodoo a “corruption.” Time and misuse and human denial had slurred the word in the same way that *Vieux Carré* had become “Voo Carré.”

Voodoo.

Vieux Dieux.

Old Gods.

Weakened with nausea, Blaisdell clung to the wall of the mausoleum and watched the two monstrosities converse in their unfathomable dead language. Far worse than their awful appearance was the impression that the greater portion of their bodies were hidden from view—that their alien forms penetrated down into the ground or, more accurately, extended into regions unseen. Blaisdell had the horrid notion that they were not separate entities at all but rather parts of a greater whole, like giant fingers dipped into the shallows of our world to feel and grope and seize. Perhaps all

humans were nothing more than nascent sensory ganglia in the service of some vast, inscrutable *corpus universalis*.

His theory received dreadful confirmation an instant later, when a curtain parted in the scene before him. A yawning gap appeared in his view of the cemetery, as though the walls and tombs and sand-strewn paths were merely matte paintings on a theatrical backdrop. And through the dark rift, he glimpsed the reality that underlay the stagecraft of the visible world: a cosmos of galactic, glistening viscera, of mammoth pulsing veins and twitching, unidentifiable organs.

The things that had been Legrasse and Garston filed into the open gash in space, which then slammed shut like the door to Valhalla. A sonic boom detonated the air, and the resultant shockwave blew the surrounding crypts into a hail of bricks and bones. The explosion burst Blaisdell's eardrums and threw him back as far as the cemetery's main gate, where unconsciousness gave him a respite of blessed oblivion.

* * *

It was nearly a week before he awoke in the LSU Medical Center, and by that time the cataclysm in the famous St. Louis #1 Cemetery had made national headlines. Local authorities attributed the incident to a lightning bolt from the tropical storm. Blaisdell, temporarily deaf and still recovering from a concussion, said nothing to disabuse them of that theory.

As soon as he was able, he returned to Princeton and immediately retired from his position in the Anthropology Department. The locals saw him seldom after that. Occasionally, one would find him in a local diner, hands pressed to his head as if holding it in place.

For he had peered beneath the veil and, try as he might, he could no longer see the world around him as genuine. With dismal mien, he awaited the day when every mask, every comforting false face would be ripped away—from him, from the world, from the new gods we created in our own image, from the universe itself—and there would be no cherished illusions

to cling to. Nothing left but those things... the ones whose true name he could not bring himself to speak.

The Voodoo.

Lore

WADE GERMAN

Wade German's poems have appeared in journals and anthologies such as Dreams and Nightmares, Nameless, Space and Time, Spectral Realms, Weird Fiction Review, Avatars of Wizardry (P'rea Press, 2012), and A Darke Phantastique (Cycatrix Press, 2014). His work has received several Pushcart and Rhysling nominations, as well as honourable mentions in Ellen Datlow's Best Horror of the Year anthologies. His first collection, Dreams from a Black Nebula, was published by Hippocampus Press in 2014.

In darkest legend was the lore described;
By darker providence it came to me—
A minor demonologist and scribe;
A lowly priest who served the Holy See,
Who at his bishop's scholarly behest
Had sought and found the dreadful palimpsest.

Upon that mouldy human vellum scroll,
In script half-eaten by the worm and moth
And overwritten by a nameless soul,
Were quotes from Eibon and the Book of Thoth
Regarding entities of ancient mind,
That visited this world before our kind.

What followed were the hidden histories
Of immemorial tribes of peoples lost;
Of continents that drowned beneath the seas,
Of arts and knowledge lost to holocaust
That saner minds avowedly disown,
Preferring ignorance of the unknown.

I read the songs by sorcerers of Mu,
Of primal ancestors who sowed the seeds
Their gods had given them when Earth was new
For evolution of a newer breed,
To proffer to the patron gods profound
When they returned again to Terran ground.

Then followed runes that weirdly replicate
The eerie echoes of the Muan verse—
From lords of lost Atlantis, who relate
Their alien creators were a curse;
And witch-kings of Lemuria whose rules
Were reined by greater masters wise and cruel.

Then baleful rites of worship to that race
Described demonic beings from the stars
Who traveled through the gulfs of time and space
From evil planets that no longer are—
For all their suns in chaos had unfurled,
And caused their race to spread to other worlds.

And written were their sigils, signs and seals,
That overlap into an awful scheme—
A map of mystic symbols that reveals
The way to open channels to their dreams
In manners similar to certain spells
That conjure things from out the seven hells.

With growing sense of horror, here I read
They dwell in frozen crypts beneath the sea,
In stasis bearing semblance to the dead,
Awaiting keepers of their prophecy
To raise their race by necromantic tools
And bear dark witness to their wrath and rule...

Provided in the text were keys to prove
To any unbeliever's shuttered mind
That all the locks on truth had been removed;
But final proof took seven years to find,
In one black nameless incunabulum
That correlates the scroll's forbidden sum:

I thought myself a man by God adored,
But learned my god was just a wispy wraith.
An apostate, I keep the eldritch lore,
The revelation of an elder faith—
Our world is but an altar in the void
Where souls shall be devoured and destroyed.

ABOUT THE EDITOR

S. T. Joshi is the author of *The Weird Tale* (University of Texas Press, 1990), *The Modern Weird Tale* (McFarland, 2001), *Unutterable Horror: A History of Supernatural Fiction* (PS Publishing, 2012), and other critical and biographical studies. His award-winning biography, *H. P. Lovecraft: A Life* (Necronomicon Press, 1996), has been expanded and updated as *I Am Providence: The Life and Times of H. P. Lovecraft* (Hippocampus Press, 2010). He has edited Lovecraft's stories, essays, letters, and revisions, as well as works by Ambrose Bierce, Arthur Machen, Lord Dunsany, Algernon Blackwood, and other writers.

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